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# KOLYMA TALES

Varlam Tikhonovich Shalamov was born in 1907. A prose writer and poet, he has become known chiefly for his *Kolyma Tales*, in which he describes life in the Soviet forced-labour camps in north eastern Siberia. It is a theme he returns to in a second collection of stories, *Graphite*.

Shalamov was arrested for some unknown ‘crime’ in 1929 when he was only twenty-two and a student at the law school of Moscow University. He was sentenced to three years in Solovki, a former monastery that had been confiscated from the Church and converted into a concentration camp. In 1937 he was arrested again and sentenced to five years in Kolyma. In 1942 his sentence was extended ‘till the end of the war’; in 1943 he received an additional ten-year sentence for having praised the effectiveness of the German army and having described Ivan Bunin, the Nobel laureate, as a ‘classic Russian writer’. He appears to have spent a total of seventeen years in Kolyma.

Shalamov did manage to smuggle *Kolyma Tales* out to the West, and they were published in German and French (and only much later in English). The Soviet authorities then forced him to sign a statement, published in *Literaturnaya gazeta* in 1972, in which he stated that the topic of *Kolyma Tales* was no longer relevant after the Twentieth Party Congress, ‘that he had never sent out any manuscripts, and that he was a loyal Soviet citizen’. Once Shalamov had renounced *Kolyma Tales*, he was permitted to publish his poems in the Soviet Union, and these began to appear in literary journals in 1956. Four small collections were published between 1961 and 1972. When he first came across an anthology of Shalamov’s poetry, Solzhenitsyn said that he ‘trembled as if he were meeting a brother’. Varlam Shalamov died in 1982.

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for the American Book Award.

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# *Kolyma Tales*

VARLAM SHALAMOV

*Translated from the Russian by* JOHN GLAD

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*Engineer Kipreev, Mr Popp's Visit, The Letter, Fire and Water and Graphite.*

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# *Foreword*

In our positivistic civilization, one of the inappropriate compliments sometimes paid to literature is to reduce it to ‘artistic knowledge’. Not that such cognizance does not exist, but art is both more and less than knowledge. It is unique, *sui generis*, a thing in and of itself. And its experience is one of the precious justifications for our own existence.

While the work of art ‘enriches’ (another unsuitable analogy), at the same time it creates a postpartum sense of loss: the first experience is unique, an act never to be repeated – no matter how great the understanding and appreciation later achieved through the most intent study. If only we could erase from our minds the memory of our favorite books and return to the still unsuspected wonder contained in those works! When we recommend them to our friends, we do so in envy – that we cannot recreate that initial magic for ourselves. And the more we love a book, the greater is our own wistfulness. We cannot step into the same river twice, not so much because the river is different, but because we ourselves are in flux.

If you are about to read the stories of Varlam Shalamov for the first time, you are a person to be envied, a person whose life is about to be changed, a person who will envy others once you yourself have forded these waters.

*Kolyma Tales* tell of life in the Soviet forced-labor camps and the stories are regarded by historians as important documentary materials. Nevertheless, the *Gulag* has many chroniclers, but only one Varlam Shalamov. This book can be profitably read as fictionalized history; the phrase ‘historical novel’ is itself a ‘historical accident’; history in literature is not limited to the larger genres. But *Kolyma Tales* is much more than that. If the camps had never existed, this volume, one of the great books of world literature, would be only the more astounding as a creation of the imagination.

Separated from Alaska by the 55-mile wide Bering Strait, Kolyma was first used as a place of exile and a source of gold under the Czars. In 1853, for example, the Czarist official Muraviov-Amurski was able to send to St Petersburg three tons of gold mined by convict labor. Over half a century later the Soviet Union, the world's second largest gold producer, also exploited Kolyma as an enormous prison, where the principal occupation was gold-mining.

It is extraordinarily difficult to come up with a reliable estimate of the total number of political victims during the Soviet period. On 6 April 1990 the Soviet general and historian Dmitry Volkogonov, during a lecture delivered at the Pentagon, gave a preliminary estimate of the total number of 'repressed persons' (those imprisoned and/or murdered): 22.5 million. The estimates of some non-Soviet historians run considerably higher. If we speak only of Kolyma, there is a 1949 estimate by the Polish historian Kazimierz Zamorski of 3 million people exiled there, not more than 500,000 of whom supposedly survived.[1] In 1978 Robert Conquest estimated that 3 million people met their deaths in Kolyma – certainly not fewer than 2 million.[2] It is hard to grasp such figures.

The years 1937–9 were the period of the Great Purges. Millions of people were arrested, held for months in appalling prison conditions, tried on trumped-up charges and either executed or shipped to Siberia. Emaciated as a result of a hopelessly inadequate diet, denied even sufficient drinking water and toilet facilities, freezing from the cold, they would arrive at the Siberian ports of Vladivostok, Vanino or Nakhodka after a rail trip that lasted between thirty and forty days. There they were held in transit camps for varying periods of time.

Typhus epidemics killed many. Those who survived were sent by ship from the 'mainland', for the transit camps served as slave markets for the mining operations in Kolyma. Some of the mines employed agents to identify those prisoners most capable of work. Other mines simply had standing orders for a fixed number of new prisoners each year. The high mortality rate in Kolyma made for a constant shortage of manpower.

The ships used to transport prisoners to Kolyma were purchased in England, Holland and Sweden and formerly bore names such as the *Puget Sound* and the *Commercial Quaker*. Their builders had never intended them to carry passengers, but their Soviet purchasers found their capacious holds

ideally suited for human cargo. In the freezing weather prisoners could easily be controlled by the use of fire pumps.

In 1931 a Soviet trust bearing the name Far Northern Construction was established to take charge of all forced-labor projects in north-eastern Siberia. With headquarters in the city of Magadan, Far Northern controlled all of Kolyma, an enormous natural prison bounded by the Pacific on the east, the Arctic Circle on the north and impassable mountains on the third side of the triangle. Gradually Far Northern increased its jurisdiction westward toward the Lena River and southward to the Aldan – a territory four times the size of France. Its domain may even have extended as far west as the Yenisei River. If this is true, Far Northern's authority would have extended over a territory as large as all of Western Europe.

Reingold Berzin, a Latvian communist, was in charge of the trust from 1932 to 1937. During this period conditions are reported to have been relatively tolerable: prisoners received adequate food and clothing, were given manageable work assignments and could shorten their sentences by hard work. In 1937 Berzin, his deputy I. G. Filippov and a number of others were arrested and shot as Japanese spies. Management of Far Northern was handed over to K. A. Pavlov and a pathological murderer, Major Garanin (who himself was executed in 1939). The changes in leadership were signaled by Stalin in a 1937 speech in which he criticized the 'coddling' of prisoners.

Under Pavlov and Garanin food rations were reduced to the point where most prisoners could not hope to survive: clothing and rations were insufficient for the harsh climate, and prisoners were sent to work in temperatures as cold as – 60°F.

The camps were arranged in a hierarchy that provided virtually unlimited power and privilege for the senior bureaucrats. At the bottom of the non-convict pecking order were soldiers and former convicts who had been released but were not allowed to leave. Their living conditions were only slightly better than those of the prisoners.

Whenever possible, common criminals received trustee positions. Accustomed to violence, they easily controlled the political prisoners, even though the latter outnumbered them. In general, one of the worst features of the camps was that political prisoners were constantly brutalized and murdered by professional criminals.

With the onset of the Second World War the official workday was extended from ten to twelve hours (although unofficially it was often sixteen), and the bread ration was cut to a little over one pound per day. When the war came to a close, conditions improved, and a general amnesty was declared immediately after Stalin's death for all prisoners with less than a five-year sentence. Unfortunately, only common criminals had received such light sentences.

During the Khrushchev period the politicals were released and 'rehabilitated', meaning the government admitted that they had been innocent all along.

Several Soviet books on Kolyma were published in the pre-Gorbachev era. One is Viktor Urin's *Along the Kolyma Highway to the Pole of Cold*, published in 1959. A sort of tourist's notebook of travel impressions, the book has a number of pictures – including some of women in bathing suits – and the effect is somewhat similar to that of an early *National Geographic*. Urin intersperses his travel descriptions with his own poetry. Andrei Zimkin, whose 1963 volume *At the Headwaters of the Kolyma River* makes no mention of convicts, spent from 1933 to 1961 in Kolyma. It is not clear whether he himself was a convict or a civilian employee of the camps.

Varlam Shalamov's story is, by contrast, all too clear. A priest's son, he joined a group of youthful Trotskyites in 1927, when he was a twenty-year-old law student at Moscow University. In 1929 he was picked up in a police trap when he came to collect some illegally printed materials. He refused to testify at his trial, was sentenced to three years' hard labor and was granted an early release in 1932; sentences were still comparatively mild at the time.

By then Shalamov had already begun to write both fiction and verse, although life in the camps was a topic he would take up only later. Disappointed by lack of support from his arrested friends, he decided to disengage himself from politics, but the net of state terror ensnared him, along with millions of others.

In 1937 he was rearrested and sentenced to five years' hard labor for 'counter-revolutionary Trotskyite activities'. Retried in 1943 for having praised the Nobel Prize winner Ivan Bunin and called him a 'classic Russian writer', he was condemned to remain in the camps until the end of the war. Curiously, the new sentence turned out to be a blessing in disguise. His crime of 'anti-Soviet agitation' was viewed as trivial compared to the

former ‘Trotskyite activities’. Until then he had been held in a virtual death camp, where – at nearly six feet tall – his weight had dropped to 90 pounds. With the new sentence he was transferred to a prison hospital and managed to regain his weight. Gold mining once more emaciated him, and he was returned to the hospital. After that he was sent to a logging camp where the convicts were simply not fed if they did not fulfill their work norms. Captured during an escape attempt, he was dispatched to a penal zone where, if they could not work, prisoners were thrown off a mountain or tied to a horse and dragged to their deaths. Chance came to his aid when a group of Italian prisoners were delivered to the site, replacing the Soviet convicts. It was at that point that a physician took an interest in him and managed to have him assigned to paramedical courses – a second fortunate twist of fate that literally saved his life.

In 1951 Shalamov was released from the camps, and in 1953 he was permitted to leave Magadan, though not to reside in a large city. It was after this, his final release, that he began to write *Kolyma Tales*. On 18 July 1956 he was formally ‘rehabilitated’ by the Soviet government and permitted to return to Moscow, where he worked as a journalist and, in 1961, began publishing his poetry. In all, he published five slender collections. Shalamov’s verse is intimately bound up with his experiences in Kolyma, a circumstance that could not be mentioned at the time in the collections themselves. But his true talent was as a prose writer, and his poetry did not bring him the recognition he had hoped for.

The manuscript of *Kolyma Tales* was brought to the United States in 1966 by Professor Clarence Brown of Princeton University. From 1970 to 1976 Roman Goul, editor of the New York Russian *émigré* quarterly the *New Review*, published one or two of the *Kolyma Tales* in most issues of his journal. Others appeared in the *émigré* journal *Grani*, published in Frankfurt-am-Main. The full Russian language version did not appear until 1978, when it was brought out by Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd in London. To protect Shalamov from reprisals the editors always placed a note to the effect that the stories were being published without the knowledge and consent of the author.

Although Shalamov had, in fact, consented to publication, he became angry with Goul for editing the stories and for failing to publish a separate collection. On the pages of *Literaturnaya gazeta* Shalamov published a statement claiming that the topic of *Kolyma Tales* was no longer relevant

after Khrushchev's famous de-Stalinization speech at the Twentieth Party Congress, that he had never sent any manuscript abroad for publication and that he was a loyal Soviet citizen. He inveighed against everyone previously involved in the publication of his stories in the West, shocking his former admirers so deeply that some literally removed his portrait from their homes. But even having betrayed his own major achievement, *Kolyma Tales*, he continued to write them.

Shalamov's stories are in the Chekhovian tradition, though they depict a far more savage era. A brief plot is devoted to one incident; an objective, dispassionate narration provides a contrast to the horror of the moment; and a *pointe* ends it. As Chekhov was compared with Tolstoy, so Shalamov has his counterpart: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The parallels go beyond brevity versus amplitude. Chekhov, a writer who respected the rights of the reader in the artistic process, consciously avoided drawing conclusions for his audience. Tolstoy, on the other hand (like Solzhenitsyn later), constantly lectures the reader.

By his own admission, Solzhenitsyn barely touches on Kolyma in his writings. He asked Shalamov to co-author his *Gulag Archipelago* with him, but Shalamov, already old and sick, declined. Nevertheless, Solzhenitsyn writes: 'Shalamov's experience in the camps was longer and more bitter than my own, and I respectfully confess that to him and not me was it given to touch those depths of bestiality and despair toward which life in the camps dragged us all.'

The British Slavist Geoffrey Hosking summed up the differences between Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn well:

Like *Gulag Archipelago*… this volume constitutes a chronicle and indictment of labour camp life. Yet anyone who comes to it with *Gulag Archipelago* in mind is likely to be very surprised. Outwardly at least, Shalamov's work is about as different from Solzhenitsyn's as it is possible to imagine. Where Solzhenitsyn constructs a single vast panorama, loose and sprawling, Shalamov chooses the most concise of literary forms, the short story, and shapes it consciously and carefully, so that his overall structure is like a mosaic made of tiny pieces. Where Solzhenitsyn writes with anger, sarcasm and bitterness, Shalamov adopts a studiedly dry and neutral tone. Where Solzhenitsyn plunges into his characters' fates, telling their story from a variety of subjective viewpoints, Shalamov takes strict

control of his discourse, usually conducting his narrative from an undivided viewpoint and aiming at complete objectivity. Where Solzhenitsyn is fiercely moralistic and preaches redemption through suffering, Shalamov contents himself with cool aphorisms and asserts that real suffering, such as Kolyma imposed on its inmates, can only demoralize and break the spirit.[3]

Central to any discussion of Shalamov's writing is the subject of genre. We have here a literary form attempting to bridge the gap between fact and fiction – something like the historical novel. Shalamov's stories represent a fusion of art and life, and it is not possible to separate aesthetic evaluation from historical appraisal. While the stories should not be accepted as precise factual accounts, it is important to realize that the overwhelming majority of them are autobiographical in nature.

In 'My First Tooth' Shalamov describes how he himself was beaten during his first sentence for speaking up for a member of a religious sect; his tooth was knocked out, and he was made to stand naked in the cold. 'The Lawyers' Plot' describes what was to have been his own execution; he was saved by a bloody shake-up among the political bosses. Merzlakov's attempt to feign paralysis in 'Shock Therapy' is a case that he personally witnessed. He saw the bodies dug from the ground by the American bulldozer in 'Lend-Lease', and 'Condensed Milk' describes how another convict tried to lure him into an escape attempt so as to be able to betray him to camp authorities. His correspondence with 'Fleming' in 'The Used-Book Dealer' is part of his personal archive, and 'The Train' describes his own attempt to return home. 'A Pushover Job', 'Carpenters', 'Dry Rations', 'Sententious', 'Quiet', 'On Tick', 'A Piece of Meat', 'The Snake Charmer', 'Chief of Political Control', 'A Child's Drawings', 'Magic' and 'Esperanto' are all taken from his personal experience; 'Major Pugachov's Last Battle', on the other hand, was not taken from his own life, although it is partly based on historical fact.

In the late 1970s Shalamov's health began to fail. In 1979 the Literary Fund (the department of the Writers' Union that oversaw questions of residence, pensions and the like) managed to have him placed in an old people's home, where he lost his vision and hearing. The degree to which he was able to comprehend what was happening around him is unclear.

On 17 January 1982 I gave a talk on Shalamov's life and work for the Greater Washington, DC chapter of the Russian Literary Fund. It was the coldest day in the city's history – as if Kolyma had come to Washington – and only a handful of devoted admirers braved the weather. We did not know it at the time, but Shalamov had died that very day.

When I learned the news I called the Moscow offices of the Soviet Writers' Union, which refused to provide any information other than the fact that Shalamov had died and been buried. Later I received photographs of the funeral and learned that two days earlier he had been transferred from one old people's home to another and had not survived the move.

In late fall of 1987 I met with Sergey Zalygin, editor-in-chief of Russia's most renowned magazine, *Novy mir*. Zalygin spoke with great optimism about reform in the Soviet Union. I countered that *Kolyma Tales* still could not be published. He seemed genuinely intrigued by my comment and promised to give the matter serious consideration; before a year had passed he brought out a selection of the *Kolyma Tales* in his magazine.

In 1989, for the first time in sixteen years, I was issued a visa to visit the Soviet Union. As I crossed a street, using one of Moscow's broad underground passageways, I saw a long line of people queuing up. Since consumer goods are scarce in today's Russia and queues are a part of life, I was about to walk past without taking any notice until I saw that it was not oranges or shampoo being sold but… *Kolyma Tales*. The man standing at the head of the line purchased three copies. The woman standing behind him bought six.

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Abraham Brumberg, Diana Glad, Leonard Meyers, Karen McDermott, Cynthia Rosenberger, Emily Tall and Josephine Woll for their help in preparing this volume.

I owe a special debt to the very talented Susan Ashe for her numerous suggestions on style.

In April 1990 Iraida Sirotinskaya, Shalamov's heir, arrived to visit Washington and provided me with much of the autobiographical information provided here.

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John Glad

Washington, DC

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# *Kolyma Tales*

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# *Through the Snow*

How is a road beaten down through the virgin snow? One person walks ahead, sweating, swearing, and barely moving his feet. He keeps getting stuck in the loose, deep snow. He goes far ahead, marking his path with uneven black pits. When he tires, he lies down on the snow, lights a home-made cigarette, and the tobacco smoke hangs suspended above the white, gleaming snow like a blue cloud. The man moves on, but the cloud remains hovering above the spot where he rested, for the air is motionless. Roads are always beaten down on days like these – so that the wind won't sweep away this labor of man. The man himself selects points in the snow's infinity to orient himself – a cliff, a tall tree. He steers his body through the snow in the same fashion that a helmsman steers a riverboat from one cape to another.

Five or six persons follow shoulder-to-shoulder along the narrow, wavering track of the first man. They walk beside his path but not along it. When they reach a predetermined spot, they turn back and tramp down the clean virgin snow which has not yet felt the foot of man. The road is tramped down. It can be used by people, sleighs, tractors. If they were to walk directly behind the first man, the second group would make a clearly defined but barely passable narrow path, and not a road. The first man has the hardest task, and when he is exhausted, another man from the group of five takes his place. Each of them – even the smallest and weakest – must beat down a section of virgin snow, and not simply follow in another's footsteps. Later will come tractors and horses driven by readers, instead of authors and poets.

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# *On Tick*

They were playing cards on Naumov's berth in the barracks for the mine's horse-drivers. The overseer on duty never looked into that barracks, since he considered that his main duty was to keep an eye on prisoners convicted according to Article 58 of the Criminal Code – political prisoners. In a word, the horse-drivers' barracks was the safest place to be, and every night the criminal element in the camp gathered there to play cards.

In a corner of the barracks on the lower cots quilts of various colors were spread. To the corner post was wired a burning *kolymka* – a home-made lamp that worked on gas fumes. Three or four open-ended copper tubes were soldered to the lid of a tin can. It was a very simple device. When hot coals were placed on the lid, the gas heated up and fumes rose along the pipes, burning at the pipe ends when lit by a match.

On the blankets lay a dirty feather pillow and on either side of it the players sat, their legs tucked under them. A new deck of cards lay on the pillow. These were not ordinary cards, but a home-made prison deck made with amazing deftness by the local wizards. They needed only paper, a piece of bread (chewed and pressed through a rag, it produced starch to glue the sheets together), an indelible pencil stub, and a knife (to cut stencils for the card suits and the cards themselves).

Today's cards were cut from a book by Victor Hugo; someone had forgotten the book the day before in the office. It had heavy thick paper, so there was no need to glue sheets together.

A dirty hand with the slender white fingers of a non-working man was patting the deck on the pillow. The nail of the little finger was of unusual length – a fashion among the criminals just like their gold, that is, bronze crowns put on completely healthy teeth. As for the fingernails, nail polish

would unquestionably have become popular in the ‘criminal world’ if it were possible to obtain polish in prison circumstances.

The owner of the deck was running his left hand through his sticky, dirty, light-colored hair, which was meticulously cut with a square back. Everything in his face – the low unwrinkled forehead, yellow bushy brows, and pursed lips – provided him with the impression valued most in a thief: inconspicuousness. He had the kind of face no one remembered. One had but to glance at him to forget his every feature and not recognize him at the next meeting. This was Seva, a famous expert on such classic card games as *Terz, Stoss*, and *Bura*, the inspired interpreter of a thousand card rules to be rigidly followed. It was said of Seva that he was a ‘great performer’, that is, he could demonstrate the dexterity of a card-sharp. Of course, he was a card-sharp, since an honest thief’s game is a game of deceit: watch your partner – that’s your right; know how to cheat; know how to talk your way out of a dubious loss.

They always played in pairs – one on one. None of the experts would lower himself to participate in group games such as Twenty-One. Seva’s partner was Naumov, the brigade leader of the horse-drivers. He was older than his partner (but then, just how old was Seva? Twenty? Thirty? Forty?). Naumov had black hair and deep-set black eyes that gave the impression of a martyr. If I hadn’t known he was a railroad thief from the Kuban region I would have taken him for a member of the religious sect *God Knows* that had been cropping up for decades in the camps. This impression was deepened by the lead cross that hung from a cord around Naumov’s neck – the collar of his shirt was unbuttoned. Nothing blasphemous was intended in the cross. At the time all the thieves wore aluminum crosses around their necks; it was a kind of symbol, like a tattoo.

In the twenties the thieves wore trade-school caps; still earlier, the military officer’s cap was in fashion. In the forties, during the winter, they wore peakless leather caps, folded down the tops of their felt boots, and wore a cross around the neck. The cross was usually smooth but if an artist was around, he was forced to use a needle to paint it with the most diverse subjects: a heart, cards, a crucifixion, a naked woman… Naumov’s cross was smooth. It hung on his bare chest, partially blocking the tattoo which was a quote from Esenin, the only poet the ‘criminal world’ recognized:

So few my roads,

So many the mistakes.

‘What are you playing for?’ Seva spat out his question with boundless contempt; this was considered *bon ton* at the beginning of a game.

‘These duds.’ Naumov tapped his own shoulders.

‘Five hundred,’ Seva appraised Naumov’s jacket and pants.

In response there erupted an elaborate stream of obscenities intended to convince the opponent of the much greater worth of the object. The viewers surrounding the players patiently waited for the end of this traditional overture. Seva was not one to fall behind and he swore even more bitterly, trying to lower the price. For his part Seva was ‘playing’ a few second-hand pullovers. After the pullovers had been appraised and cast on the blanket, Seva shuffled the cards.

I was sawing wood for Naumov’s barracks together with Garkunov, a former textile engineer. This was night work – after the normal work in the mines. We had to chop and saw enough wood for the day. We came to the horse-drivers’ barracks immediately after supper; it was warmer here than in our barracks. When we finished, Naumov’s orderly gave us some bread and poured cold soup into our pots. It was the leftovers of the single invariable dish of the cafeteria, called ‘Ukrainian dumplings’ on the menu. We would always sit on the floor somewhere in the corner and quickly eat our wages. We ate in absolute darkness; the barracks’ *kolymkas* lit the card-playing area. At the moment we were watching Seva and Naumov.

Naumov lost his ‘duds’. The pants and jacket lay next to Seva on the blanket. The pillow was being played for. Seva’s fingernail described elaborate patterns in the air. The cards would disappear in his palm and then appear again. Naumov was wearing an undershirt; his satin Russian blouse departed after the pants. Someone’s helpful hands threw a padded jacket over his shoulders, but he cast it off with a jerky movement. Suddenly everyone fell silent. Seva was scratching the pillow with his nail.

‘I’ll play the blanket,’ said Naumov hoarsely.

‘Two hundred,’ Seva responded indifferently.

‘A thousand, you bitch!’ Naumov shouted.

‘For what? It’s nothing! Junk!’ Seva exclaimed. ‘But for you I’ll play it at three hundred.’

The game continued. According to the rules it could not be ended until one of the partners had nothing left with which to ‘answer’.

‘I’ll play the felt boots!’

‘Nothing doing,’ said Seva firmly. ‘I don’t play for regulation-issue rags.’

A Ukrainian towel embroidered with roosters and appraised at a few rubles was played and then a cigarette case with a pressed profile of Gogol. Everything transferred to Seva. The dark skin of Naumov’s cheeks reddened.

‘On tick,’ he said obsequiously.

‘That’s all I need,’ Seva responded in a lively fashion and stretched his hand back over his shoulder; immediately a lit, home-made cigarette was put into it. Seva inhaled deeply and coughed.

‘What am I supposed to do with your ‘tick”? No new prisoners are coming in; where can you get anything? From the guards?’

The ‘rules’ didn’t oblige Seva to play ‘on tick’, that is, on credit, but Seva didn’t want to offend Naumov by depriving him of his last chance to recoup his losses.

‘One hundred,’ he said slowly. ‘We’ll play for an hour.’

‘Give me a card.’ Naumov adjusted his cross and sat down. He won back the blanket, pillow, and pants. Then he lost everything again.

‘We need some *chifir*,’ said Seva, putting the things he had won into a large plywood suitcase. ‘I’ll wait.’

‘Make some, guys,’ said Naumov. This was an amazing northern drink; several ounces of tea leaves went into one mug – the drink was extremely bitter, drunk in swallows with a snack of salted fish. It totally eliminated any drowsiness and therefore was favored by thieves and long-distance truck drivers in the north.

Naumov’s heavy black gaze roamed over the surrounding company. His hair was tangled. His gaze fell upon me and stopped. Some thought flashed over his face.

‘Come here.’

I came out into the light.

‘Take off the coat.’

It was clear what he had in mind, and everyone watched with interest.

Under the quilted jacket I wore only the regulation undershirt. I’d been issued a field shirt two years earlier, but it had long since rotted away. I got dressed.

‘Now you,’ said Naumov, pointing at Garkunov. Garkunov took off his quilted jacket. His face was white. Beneath the dirty undershirt was a wool

sweater. It was the last package from his wife before he was sent off to Siberia, and I knew how Garkunov treasured it. In the bathhouse he would wash the sweater and then dry it on his own body; he never let it out of his hands for a minute, because it would have been stolen immediately.

‘Let’s have it,’ said Naumov.

‘I won’t take it off,’ said Garkunov hoarsely. ‘You’ll have to take the skin with…’

They rushed at him, knocking him down.

‘He’s biting,’ someone shouted.

Garkunov slowly got up from the floor, wiping the blood from his face with his sleeve. Immediately Sasha, Naumov’s orderly, the same Sasha who had just poured us soup for sawing wood, stooped down and jerked something from the top of his boot. Then he stretched out his hand to Garkunov, and Garkunov sobbed and started to lean over on his side.

‘Couldn’t we get along without that?’ shouted Seva.

In the flickering light of the gasoline lamp, Garkunov’s face became gray.

Sasha stretched out the dead man’s arms, tore off his undershirt, and pulled the sweater over his head. The sweater was red, and the blood on it was hardly noticeable. Seva folded the sweater into the plywood suitcase – carefully, so as not to get the blood on his fingers. The game was over. I went back to my barracks. Now I had to find a new partner to cut wood with.

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# *In the Night*

Supper was over. Slowly Glebov licked the bowl and brushed the breadcrumbs methodically from the table into his left palm. Without swallowing, he felt each miniature fragment of bread in his mouth coated greedily with a thick layer of saliva. Glebov couldn't have said whether it tasted good or not. Taste was an entirely different thing, not worthy to be compared with this passionate sensation that made all else recede into oblivion. Glebov was in no hurry to swallow; the bread itself melted in his mouth and quickly vanished.

Bagretsov's cavernous, gleaming eyes stared into Glebov's mouth without interruption. None of them had enough will power to take his eyes from food disappearing in another's mouth. Glebov swallowed his saliva, and Bagretsov immediately shifted his gaze to the horizon – to the large orange moon crawling out on to the sky.

'It's time,' said Bagretsov. Slowly they set out along a path leading to a large rock and climbed up on to a small terrace encircling the hill. Although the sun had just set, cold had already settled into the rocks that in the daytime burned the soles of feet that were bare inside the rubber galoshes. Glebov buttoned his quilted jacket. Walking provided no warmth.

'Is it much farther?' he asked in a whisper.

'Some way,' Bagretsov answered quietly.

They sat down to rest. They had nothing to say or even think of – everything was clear and simple. In a flat area at the end of the terrace were mounds of stone dug from the ground and drying moss that had been ripped from its bed.

'I could have handled this myself,' Bagretsov smiled wryly. 'But it's more cheerful work if there are two of us. Then, too, I figured you were an old friend…'

They had both been brought on the same ship the previous year.

Bagretsov stopped: ‘Get down or they’ll see us.’

They lay down and began to toss the stones to the side. None of the rocks was too big for two men to lift since the people who had heaped them up that morning were no stronger than Glebov.

Bagretsov swore quietly. He had cut his finger and the blood was flowing. He sprinkled sand on the wound, ripped a piece of wadding from his jacket, and pressed it against the cut, but the blood wouldn’t stop.

‘Poor coagulation,’ Glebov said indifferently.

‘Are you a doctor?’ asked Bagretsov, sucking the wound.

Glebov remained silent. The time when he had been a doctor seemed very far away. Had it ever existed? Too often the world beyond the mountains and seas seemed unreal, like something out of a dream. Real were the minute, the hour, the day – from reveille to the end of work. He never guessed further, nor did he have the strength to guess. Nor did anyone else.

He didn’t know the past of the people who surrounded him and didn’t want to know. But then, if tomorrow Bagretsov were to declare himself a doctor of philosophy or a marshal of aviation, Glebov would believe him without a second thought. Had he himself really been a doctor? Not only the habit of judgment was lost, but even the habit of observation. Glebov watched Bagretsov suck the blood from his finger but said nothing. The circumstance slid across his consciousness, but he couldn’t find or even seek within himself the will to answer. The consciousness that remained to him – the consciousness that was perhaps no longer human – had too few facets and was now directed toward one goal only, that of removing the stones as quickly as possible.

‘Is it deep?’ Glebov asked when they stopped to rest.

‘How can it be deep?’ Bagretsov replied.

And Glebov realized his question was absurd, that of course the hole couldn’t be deep.

‘Here he is,’ Bagretsov said. He reached out to touch a human toe. The big toe peered out from under the rocks and was perfectly visible in the moonlight. The toe was different from Glebov’s and Bagretsov’s toes – but not in that it was lifeless and stiff; there was very little difference in this regard. The nail of the dead toe was clipped, and the toe itself was fuller

and softer than Glebov's. They quickly tossed aside the remaining stones heaped over the body.

'He's a young one,' Bagretsov said.

Together the two of them dragged the corpse from the grave.

'He's so big and healthy,' Glebov said, panting.

'If he weren't so fattened up,' Bagretsov said, 'they would have buried him the way they bury us, and there would have been no reason for us to come here today.'

They straightened out the corpse and pulled off the shirt.

'You know, the shorts are like new,' Bagretsov said with satisfaction.

Glebov hid the underwear under his jacket.

'Better to wear it,' Bagretsov said.

'No, I don't want to,' Glebov muttered.

They put the corpse back in the grave and heaped it over with rocks.

The blue light of the rising moon fell on the rocks and the scant forest of the taiga, revealing each projecting rock, each tree in a peculiar fashion, different from the way they looked by day. Everything seemed real but different than in the daytime. It was as if the world had a second face, a nocturnal face.

The dead man's underwear was warm under Glebov's jacket and no longer seemed alien.

'I need a smoke,' Glebov said in a dreamlike fashion.

'Tomorrow you'll get your smoke.'

Bagretsov smiled. Tomorrow they would sell the underwear, trade it for bread, maybe even get some tobacco…

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# *Carpenters*

For two days the white fog was so thick a man couldn't be seen two paces away. But then there wasn't much opportunity to take long walks alone. Somehow you could guess the direction of the mess hall, the hospital, the guardhouse – those few points we had to be able to find. That same sense of direction that animals possess perfectly also awakens in man under the right conditions.

The men were not shown the thermometer, but that wasn't necessary since they had to work in any weather. Besides, longtime residents of Kolyma could determine the weather precisely even without a thermometer: if there was frosty fog, that meant the temperature outside was forty degrees below zero; if you exhaled easily but in a rasping fashion, it was fifty degrees below zero; if there was a rasping and it was difficult to breathe, it was sixty degrees below; after sixty degrees below zero, spit froze in mid-air. Spit had been freezing in mid-air for two weeks.

Potashnikov woke each morning with the hope that the cold had let up during the night. He knew from last winter's experience that no matter how low the temperature was, a sharp change was necessary for a feeling of warmth. If the frost were to weaken its grip even to forty or fifty degrees below zero, it would be warm for two days, and there was no sense in planning more than two days ahead.

But the cold kept up, and Potashnikov knew he couldn't hold out any longer. Breakfast sustained his strength for no more than an hour of work, and then exhaustion ensued. Frost penetrated the body to the 'marrow of the bone' – the phrase was no metaphor. A man could wave his pick or shovel, jump up and down so as not to freeze – till dinner. Dinner was hot – a thin broth and two spoons of kasha that restored one's strength only a little but nevertheless provided some warmth. And then there was strength to work

for an hour, and after that Potashnikov again felt himself in the grip of the cold. The day would finally come to a close, and after supper all the workers would take their bread back to the barracks, where they would eat it, washing it down with a mug of hot water. Not a single man would eat his bread in the mess hall with his soup. After that Potashnikov would go to sleep.

He slept, of course, on one of the upper berths, because the lower ones were like an ice cellar. Everyone who had a lower berth would stand half the night at the stove, taking turns with his neighbors in embracing it; the stove retained a slight remnant of warmth. There was never enough firewood, because to go for it meant a four-kilometer walk after work and everyone avoided the task. The upper berths were warmer, but even so everyone slept in his working clothes – hats, padded coats, pea jackets, felt pants. Even with the extra warmth, by the morning a man's hair would be frozen to the pillow.

Potashnikov felt his strength leaving him every day. A thirty-year-old man, he had difficulty in climbing on to an upper berth and even in getting down from it. His neighbor had died yesterday. The man simply didn't wake up, and no one asked for the cause of death, as if there were only one cause that everyone knew. The orderly was happy that the man died in the morning, and not in the evening, since the orderly got the dead man's ration for the day. Everyone realized this, and Potashnikov screwed up his courage to approach the orderly.

'Break off a piece of the crust,' he asked, but the orderly cursed him as only a man whose weakness lent him strength could. Potashnikov fell silent and walked away.

He had to take some action, think of something with his weakened mind. Either that or die. Potashnikov had no fear of death, but he couldn't rid himself of a passionate secret desire, a last stubbornness – to live. He didn't want to die here in the frost under the boots of the guards, in the barracks with its swearing, dirt, and total indifference written on every face. He bore no grudge for people's indifference, for he had long since comprehended the source of that spiritual dullness. The same frost that transformed a man's spit into ice in mid-air also penetrated the soul. If bones could freeze, then the brain could also be dulled and the soul could freeze over. And the soul shuddered and froze – perhaps to remain frozen for ever. Potashnikov

had lost everything except the desire to survive, to endure the cold and remain alive.

Having gulped down his bowl of warm soup, Potashnikov was barely able to drag himself to the work area. The work gang stood at attention before beginning work, and a fat red-faced man in a deerskin hat and a white leather coat walked up and down the rows in Yakut deerskin boots. He peered into their exhausted dirty faces. The gang foreman walked up and respectfully spoke to the man in the deerskin hat.

‘I really haven’t got anyone like that, Alexander Yevgenievich. You’ll have to try Sobolev and the petty criminal element. These are all intellectuals, Alexander Yevgenievich. They’re a pain in the neck.’

The man in the deerskin hat stopped looking over the men and turned to the gang foreman.

‘The foremen don’t know their people, they don’t want to know, they don’t want to help us,’ he said hoarsely.

‘Have it your way, Alexander Yevgenievich.’

‘I’ll show you. What’s your name?’

‘My name’s Ivanov, Alexander Yevgenievich.’

‘Just watch. Hey, guys, attention!’ The man in the deerskin hat walked up to the work gang. ‘The camp administration needs carpenters to make boxes to haul dirt.’

Everyone was silent.

‘You see, Alexander Yevgenievich?’ the foreman whispered.

Potashnikov suddenly heard his own voice.

‘I’m a carpenter.’ And he stepped forward. Another man stepped forward on his right. Potashnikov knew him; it was Grigoriev.

‘Well,’ said the man in the deerskin hat, turning to the foreman, ‘are you an incompetent asshole or not? OK, fellows, follow me.’

Potashnikov and Grigoriev stumbled after the man in the deerskin hat. He stopped.

‘At this pace,’ he said hoarsely, ‘we won’t make it even by dinnertime. Here’s what. I’ll go ahead and you go to the shop and ask for the foreman, Sergeev. You know where the carpentry shop is?’

‘We know, we know,’ Grigoriev said in a loud voice. ‘Please, give us a smoke.’

‘I think I’ve heard that request before,’ the man in the deerskin hat muttered and pulled out two cigarettes without removing the pack from his

pocket.

Potashnikov walked ahead and thought frantically. Today he would be in the warmth of the carpentry shop. He'd sharpen the axe and make a handle. And sharpen the saw. No sense hurrying. He could kill time till dinner signing out the tools and finding the quartermaster. By evening they'd realize he didn't know how to make an axe handle or sharpen a saw, and they'd kick him out. Tomorrow he'd have to return to the work gang. But today he'd be warm. Maybe he could remain a carpenter tomorrow and the day after tomorrow – if Grigoriev was a carpenter. He'd be Grigoriev's helper. Winter was nearly over. Somehow he'd survive the short summer.

Potashnikov stopped and waited for Grigoriev.

'Do you know how… to be a carpenter?' he asked, holding his breath in sudden hope.

'Well, you see,' said Grigoriev cheerfully, 'I was a graduate student at the Moscow Philological Institute. I don't see why anyone with a higher education, especially one in the humanities, can't sharpen an axe and set the teeth on a saw. Particularly if he has to do it next to a hot stove.'

'That means you can't do it either…'

'It doesn't mean anything. We'll fool them for two days, and what do you care what happens after that?'

'We'll fool them for one day, and tomorrow we'll be back in the work gang…'

Together the two of them barely managed to open the frozen door. In the middle of the carpentry shop stood a red-hot cast-iron stove; five carpenters were working without coats and hats at their benches. The new arrivals knelt before the stove's open door as if it were the god of fire, one of man's first gods. They threw down their mittens and stretched their hands toward the warmth but were not able to feel it immediately since their hands were numb. In a minute Grigoriev and Potashnikov knelt, took off their hats, and unbuttoned their padded jackets.

'What are you doing here?' one of the carpenters asked with hostility.

'We're carpenters. We're going to work here,' Grigoriev said.

'Alexander Yevgenievich said so,' Potashnikov added hurriedly.

'That means you're the ones the foreman told us to give axes to?' asked Arishtrem, an older man in charge of tools who was planing shovel handles in the corner.

'That's us, that's us…'

‘Here they are,’ Arishtrem said, looking them over sceptically. ‘Two axes, a saw, and a tooth-setter. You’ll return the tooth-setter later. Here’s my axe; make yourself a handle with it.’

Arishtrem smiled.

‘You’ll have to do thirty handles a day,’ he said.

Grigoriev took the block of wood from Arishtrem’s hands and began to hack away at it. The dinner horn sounded, but Arishtrem kept staring silently at Grigoriev’s work.

‘Now you,’ he said to Potashnikov.

Potashnikov put the log on the stump, took the axe from Grigoriev’s hands, and began to trim the piece.

The carpenters had all left for dinner, and there was no one left in the shop except the three men.

‘Take my two axe handles,’ Arishtrem said, handing the two ready pieces to Grigoriev, ‘and mount the heads. Sharpen the saw. You can stay warm at the stove today and tomorrow. After that, go back where you came from. Here’s a piece of bread for dinner.’

They stayed warm at the stove those two days, and the following day it was only twenty degrees below zero. Winter was over.

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# *An Individual Assignment*

That evening the overseer rolled up his measuring-tape and said that Dugaev would get an individual assignment for the next day. The foreman, who had been standing beside them and asking the overseer to credit his work gang with ‘an extra ten cubic meters of earth till the day after tomorrow’, suddenly fell silent and stared at an evening star sparkling over the crest of the hill. Baranov, Dugaev’s ‘partner’, who had been helping the overseer measure the amount of work done, picked up his shovel and began to clean the already cleaned pit.

Dugaev was twenty-three years old, and everything that he saw and heard here amazed more than surprised him.

The work gang gathered for a head count, turned in its tools, and returned to the barracks in uneven convict formation. The difficult day was over. In the cafeteria Dugaev, still standing, drank his bowl of cold, watery barley soup. The day’s bread, issued in the morning, had long since been eaten. Dugaev wanted to smoke and looked around to consider who might give him a butt. Baranov was sitting on the window-sill, sprinkling some home-grown tobacco shreds from his tobacco pouch, which he had turned inside out. When he had carefully gathered them all up, he rolled a thin cigarette and handed it to Dugaev.

‘Go ahead,’ he said, ‘but leave me some.’

Dugaev was surprised, since he and Baranov had never been particularly friendly. Cold, hunger, and sleeplessness rendered any friendship impossible, and Dugaev – despite his youth – understood the falseness of the belief that friendship could be tempered by misery and tragedy. For friendship to be friendship, its foundation had to be laid before living conditions reached that last border beyond which no human emotion was left to a man – only mistrust, rage, and lies. Dugaev remembered well the

northern proverb that listed the three commandments of prison life: ‘Don’t believe, don’t fear, don’t ask.’

Greedily Dugaev inhaled the sweet smoke of home-grown tobacco, and his head began to spin.

‘I’m getting weaker,’ he said.

Baranov said nothing.

Dugaev returned to the barracks, lay down, and closed his eyes. He had been sleeping badly of late, because he was hungry all the time. His dreams were particularly tormenting, loaves of bread, steaming greasy soup… Unconsciousness took a long time coming, but he opened his eyes half an hour before it was time to go to work anyway.

When the work gang arrived at its site, the group scattered among the assigned test pits.

‘You wait here,’ the foreman said to Dugaev. ‘The overseer will give you an assignment.’

Dugaev sat down on the ground. He was already exhausted enough to be totally indifferent to any change in his fate.

The first wheelbarrows rattled along the board walkway, and shovels scraped against stone.

‘Come over here,’ the overseer said to Dugaev. ‘This is your place.’ He measured out the cubic area of the test pit and marked it with a piece of quartz.

‘Up to here,’ he said. ‘The carpenter will nail a board to the walkway for your wheelbarrow. Dump everything where everyone else does. Here are your shovel, pick, crowbar, and wheelbarrow. Now get a move on.’

Dugaev obediently began his work.

‘It’s better this way,’ he thought. Now no one could complain that he was not working well. Yesterday’s farmers did not have to know that Dugaev was new to this sort of work, that he had enrolled in the university right after school, and that he had now exchanged his student’s existence for this mine, where it was every man for himself. They did not have to understand that he had been exhausted and hungry for a long time and that he did not know how to steal. The ability to steal was a primary virtue here, whatever it involved, from taking the bread of a fellow-inmate to claiming bonuses of thousands of rubles for fictitious, non-existent accomplishments. No one would be concerned about the fact that Dugaev could not last a sixteen-hour working day.

Dugaev swung his pick, hauled, dumped, and again swung his pick, and again hauled and dumped.

After lunch, the overseer walked up, looked at Dugaev's progress, and left without saying a word… Dugaev went on swinging his pick and dumping. It was still very far to the quartz marker.

In the evening the overseer reappeared and unwound his tape-measure. He measured the work that Dugaev had done.

'Twenty-five percent,' he said and looked at Dugaev. 'Do you hear me – twenty-five percent!'

'I hear you,' Dugaev said. He was surprised at this figure. The work was so hard, the shovel picked up so little stone, and it was so difficult to swing the pick. Twenty-five percent of the work quota seemed an enormous amount to Dugaev. His calves ached, and his arms, shoulders, and head hurt from leaning into the wheelbarrow. The sensation of hunger had long since left him. Dugaev ate, because he saw that others were eating, and something prompted him that he should eat, though he did not want to.

'Well, I guess that's that,' the overseer said as he left. 'Good luck!'

That evening Dugaev was summoned to the investigator. He answered four questions: first name, surname, crime, sentence. These were the four questions that a prisoner had to answer thirty times a day. Later Dugaev fell asleep. The next day he was again working in the work gang with Baranov, and the following night soldiers took him behind the horse barns along a path that led into the woods. They came to a tall fence topped with barbed wire. The fence nearly blocked off a small ravine, and in the night the prisoners could hear tractors backfiring in the distance. When he realized what was about to happen, Dugaev regretted that he had worked for nothing. There had been no reason for him to exhaust himself on this, his last day.

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# *A ‘Pushover’ Job*

The hills glistened white with a tinge of blue – like loaves of sugar. Round and bare of forest, they were smothered with a layer of dense snow compacted by the winds. In the ravines the snow was deep and firm; a man could stand on it. But on the slopes it swelled up in enormous blisters. These were shrubs of Siberian dwarf cedar which lay flat on the ground to hibernate through the winter – even before the first snow fell. They were what we had come for.

Of all northern trees, I loved the dwarf cedar most of all.

I had long since come to understand and appreciate the enviable haste with which poor northern nature shared its meagre wealth with equally indigent man, blossoming for him with every variety of flower. There were times when everything bloomed in a single week and when only a month after the beginning of summer the almost never setting sun would make the mountains flame red with cowberries and then darken with their deep blue. Rowan shrubs hung heavy with full, watery berries – so low you didn’t even have to raise your hand. Only the petals of the mountain sweet-brier smelled like flowers here. All the others exuded a sense of dampness, a swampy odor, and this seemed appropriate to the spring silence, both of the birds and the larch forest whose branches slowly clothed themselves in green needles. The sweet-brier clung to its fruit right into winter and from under the snow stretched out to us its wrinkled, meaty berries whose thick violet skin concealed a dark yellow flesh. I knew of the playful vines which again and again changed their color in spring from dark rose to orange to pale green, as if they were stretched with dyed kidskin. The slender fingers of the larch with their green fingernails seemed to grope everywhere, and the omnipresent, oily fireweed carpeted the scenes of former forest blazes. All this was exquisite, trusting, boisterous, rushed; but all this was in

summer when dull green grass mixed with the glaze of mossy boulders that gleamed in the sun and seemed not gray or brown, but green.

In winter it all disappeared, covered with crusty snow cast into the ravines by the winds and beaten down so hard that to climb upward a man had to hack steps in the snow with an axe. Everything was so naked that a person in the forest could be seen half a mile away. And only one tree was always green, always alive – the dwarf cedar. The tree was a weatherman. Two or three days before the first snow in the cloudless heat of fall when no one wanted even to think of the oncoming winter, the dwarf cedar would suddenly stretch out its enormous five-yard paws on the ground, lightly bend its straight, black, two-fist-thick trunk, and lie prone on the earth. A day or two would pass and a cloud would appear; toward evening a snowstorm would begin. And if in the late fall low, gray snow clouds would gather accompanied by a cold wind and the dwarf cedar did not lie down, one could be sure that no snow would fall.

Toward the end of March or in April, when there was still no trace of spring and the air was dry and rarefied as in winter, the dwarf cedar would suddenly rise up, shaking the snow from its reddish-green clothing. In a day or two the wind would shift, and warm streams of air would usher in spring.

The dwarf cedar was a very precise instrument, sensitive to the point where it sometimes deceived itself, rising during a lengthy period of thaw. But it would hurriedly lie back in the snow before the cold returned. Sometimes we would make a hot campfire in the morning to last till evening so we could warm our hands and feet. We would heap on as many logs as possible and set off to work. In two or three hours the dwarf cedar would stretch its branches out from under the snow and slowly right itself, thinking that spring had arrived. But before the fire could even go out, the tree would again lie back into the snow. Winter here is two-toned: a high pale-blue sky and the white ground. Spring would lay bare the dirty yellow rags of fall, and the earth would be clothed in this beggar’s garb for a long time – until the new greenery would gather its strength and begin to blossom furiously. In the midst of this pitiless winter and gloomy spring, the dwarf cedar would gleam blindingly green and clear. Moreover, tiny cedar nuts grew on it, and this delicacy was shared by people, birds, bears, squirrels, and chipmunks.

Having selected an area of the hill shielded from the wind, we dragged a considerable number of small and large branches into a heap and gathered

some dry grass where the wind had bared the mountain. We had brought several smoking logs with us from the barracks stove; there were no matches here.

We carried the logs in a large tin can with a wire handle attached, and had to be careful that they didn't go out along the way. Removing the charred logs from the can, we blew on them and set the smouldering ends together. I kept blowing until they began to burn and then I set them on the dry grass and twigs. All this we covered with larger branches, and soon an uncertain tail of blue smoke trailed downwind.

I had never before worked in gangs that gathered dwarf cedar needles. We did everything by hand, plucking the green, dry needles and stuffing them into sacks; in the evening we handed them over to the foreman. The needles were hauled away to a mysterious 'vitamin factory' where they were boiled down into a dark yellow viscous extract with an inexpressibly repulsive taste. Before each dinner this extract had to be drunk or eaten – however a person could manage. Its taste spoiled not only dinner, but supper as well, and many considered this 'treatment' a supplementary means of camp discipline. But without a shot-glass of this medicine it was impossible to get dinner in the cafeteria; the rule was strictly enforced. Scurvy was everywhere and dwarf cedar was the only medically approved cure. It was ultimately proved that this preparation was completely ineffective in the cure of scurvy and the 'vitamin factory' was closed. Nevertheless, faith conquers all, and at the time many drank the stinking abomination, went away spitting, but eventually recovered from scurvy. Or they didn't recover. Or they didn't drink it and recovered anyway. Everywhere were enormous clumps of sweet-brier, but no one prepared it or used it against scurvy since the instructions from Moscow said nothing about sweet-brier. (A few years later sweet-brier was brought in from the 'mainland', but it was never prepared locally.)

The instructions prescribed cedar needles as the only source of vitamin C. On that day I was assigned to gather the precious raw material. I had gotten so weak that I was transferred from the gold-mine to needle-picking.

'I'll put you on dwarf cedar for a while,' the job assigner told me in the morning. 'It'll be a pushover job for a few days.'

'Needle-picking' was considered not just an easy job, but the easiest of all. Moreover, it didn't require the presence of a guard.

After many months of work in the icy mines where every sparklingly frozen stone burned the hands, after the clicks of rifle bolts, the barking of dogs, the swearing of the overseers behind our backs, needle-gathering was an enormous pleasure, physically felt with every exhausted muscle. Needle-gatherers were sent out after the others, while it was still dark.

It was a marvelous feeling to warm your hand against the can with the smouldering logs and slowly set out for the seemingly unattainable peaks, to climb higher and higher, constantly aware of your own solitariness and the deep winter silence of the mountains. It was as if everything evil in the world had been snuffed out and only you and your companion existed on this narrow, dark, endless path in the snow, leading upward into the mountains.

My companion watched my slow motions disapprovingly. He had been gathering cedar needles for a long time and correctly surmised in me a weak, clumsy partner. Work was done in pairs, and the ‘wage’ was a joint one, divided fifty-fifty.

‘I’ll chop and you pick,’ he said. ‘And get a move on, or we won’t fill our quota. I don’t want to have to go back to the mines.’

He chopped down a few branches and dragged an enormous pile of green paws to the fire. I broke off the smaller branches and, starting with the top of each branch, pulled off the needles together with the bark. They looked like green fringe.

‘You’ll have to work faster,’ said my companion, returning with a new armload.

I could see that the work was not going well, but I couldn’t work faster. There was a ringing in my ears, and my fingers, frostbitten at the beginning of winter, ached with a familiar dull pain. I yanked at the needles, broke entire branches into smaller pieces without stripping the bark, and stuffed the product into the sack. The sack wouldn’t fill. Before the fire rose a mountain of stripped branches that looked like washed bones, but the sack kept swelling and swelling and accepting new armfuls of needles.

My companion sat down next to me, and the work went faster.

‘It’s time to go,’ he said suddenly. ‘Or else we’ll miss supper. We haven’t got enough here for the quota.’ He took from the ashes of the fire a large stone and shoved it into the sack.

‘They don’t untie them there,’ he said frowning. ‘Now we’ve met our quota.’

I stood up, scattered the burning branches, and kicked snow on to the red coals. The fire hissed and went out, and it immediately became cold. It was clear that evening was close. My companion helped me heave the sack on to my back. I staggered under its weight.

‘Try dragging it,’ my companion said. ‘After all, we’re going downhill, not up.’

We barely arrived in time to get our soup. No meat or vegetables were given for such light work.

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# *Dry Rations*

When the four of us reached the mountain spring ‘Duskania’, we were so happy we virtually stopped talking to each other. We feared that our trip here was someone’s joke or mistake and that we would be returned to plod through the icy waters at the gold-mine’s stone face. Our feet had been frostbitten a number of times, and our regulation-issue galoshes couldn’t protect them from the cold.

We followed the tractor prints as if we were hunting some enormous prehistoric beast, but the tractor road came to an end and we continued along an old, barely distinguishable footpath. We reached a small log cabin with two windows and a door hanging on a hinge that was cut from an automobile tire and nailed to the doorway. The small door had an enormous handle that looked like the handles on restaurant doors in big towns. Inside were cots made of slender logs. On the earthen floor lay a smoky black tin can. All around the small moss-covered cabin lay other rusty yellow cans of the same sort. The hut belonged to the geological prospecting group; more than a year had passed since anyone had lived in it. We were to live here and cut a road through the forest. We had brought saws and axes with us.

It was the first time we had received our food ration in advance. I was carrying a small cherished bag containing grain, sugar, fish, and some lard. The bag was tied in several places with bits of twine like a sausage. Savelev had a similar sack, but Ivan Ivanovich had two of them sewn with large masculine stitches. The fourth, Fedya Shapov, had poured his grain frivolously into the pockets of his jacket and used a knotted foot rag that served us instead of socks to hold his sugar. He’d ripped out the inner pocket of the pea jacket for a tobacco pouch in which he carefully stored any cigarette butts he happened to come across.

The very thought that this tiny ten-day ration had to be divided into thirty parts was frightening. Of course, we had the choice of eating twice a day instead of three times. We'd taken bread for only two days, since the foreman would be bringing it to us. Even such a small group was unthinkable without a foreman. We were totally unconcerned with who he might be. We'd been told that we had to prepare our quarters before he arrived.

We were all tired of barracks food. Each time they brought in the soup in large zinc tubs suspended on poles, it made us all want to cry. We were ready to cry for fear that the soup would be thin. And when a miracle occurred and the soup was thick, we couldn't believe it and ate it as slowly as possible. But even with thick soup in a warm stomach there remained a sucking pain; we'd been hungry for too long. All human emotions – love, friendship, envy, concern for one's fellow man, compassion, longing for fame, honesty – had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies during their long fasts.

Savelev and I decided to eat separately. The preparation of food is a special joy for a convict. To prepare food with one's own hands and then eat it was an incomparable pleasure, even if the skilled hands of a cook might have done it better. Our culinary skills were insignificant, and we didn't know how to prepare even a simple soup or kasha. Nevertheless, Savelev and I gathered up the cans, washed them, burned them on the campfire, cooked, fussed, and learned from each other.

Ivan Ivanovich and Fedya combined their food. Fedya emptied his pockets carefully, examining each stitch, cleaning out the individual grains with a grimy broken fingernail.

We, the four of us, were quite prepared for a trip into the future – either into the sky or into the earth. We were all well aware of the nature of scientifically determined food rations, of how certain types of food were brought in to replace others, and how a bucket of water was considered the equivalent in calories of a quarter-pound of butter. We'd all learned meekness and had forgotten how to be surprised. We had no pride, vanity, or ambition, and jealousy and passion seemed as alien to us as Mars, and trivial in addition. It was much more important to learn to button your pants in the frost. Grown men cried if they weren't able to do that. We understood that death was no worse than life, and we feared neither. We were overwhelmed by indifference. We knew that it was in our power to end this

life the very next day and now and again we made that decision, but each time life's trivia would interfere with our plans. Today they would promise an extra kilo of bread as a reward for good work, and it would be simply foolish to commit suicide on such a day. The following time the orderly of the next barracks would promise a smoke to pay back an old debt.

We realized that life, even the worst life, consists of an alternation of joys and sorrows, successes and failures, and there was no need to fear the failures more than the successes.

We were disciplined and obedient to our superiors. We understood that truth and falsehood were sisters and that there were thousands of truths in the world … We considered ourselves virtual saints, since we had redeemed all our sins by our years in camp. We had learned to understand people, to foresee their actions and fathom them. We had learned – and this was the most important thing – that our knowledge of people did not provide us with anything useful in life. What did it matter if I understood, felt, foresaw the actions of another person? I was powerless to change my own attitude toward him, and I couldn't denounce a fellow convict, no matter what he did. I refused to seek the job of foreman, which provided a chance to remain alive, for the worst thing in a camp was the forcing of one's own or anyone else's will on another person who was a convict just like oneself. I refused to seek 'useful' acquaintanceships, to give bribes. And what good did it do to know that Ivanov was a scoundrel, that Petrov was a spy, or that Zaslavsky had given false testimony?

Our inability to use certain types of 'weapons' weakened us in comparison with certain of our neighbors who shared berths with us. We learned to be satisfied with little things and rejoice at small successes.

We learned one other amazing thing: in the eyes of the state and its representatives a physically strong person was better – yes, better – more moral, more valuable than a weak person who couldn't shovel twenty cubic meters of dirt out of a trench in a day. The former was more moral than the latter. He fulfilled his 'quota', that is, carried out his chief duty to the state and society and was therefore respected by all. His advice was asked and his desires were taken into consideration, he was invited to meetings whose topics were far removed from shovelling heavy slippery dirt from wet and slimy ditches.

Thanks to his physical advantages, such a person was transformed into a moral force in the resolution of the numerous everyday questions of camp

life. Of course, he remained a moral force only as long as he remained a physical force.

When Ivan Ivanovich was first brought to camp he was an excellent ‘worker’. Now that he had become weak from hunger, he was unable to understand why everyone beat him in passing. He wasn’t beaten severely, but he was beaten: by the orderly, the barber, the contractor, the group leader, the work-gang leader, the guard. Aside from these camp officials, he was also beaten by the camp criminals. Ivan Ivanovich was happy that he had been included in our group.

Fedya Shapov, a teenager from the Altai region, became physically exhausted before the others did because his half-grown body was still not very strong. He was the only son of a widow, and he was convicted of illegal livestock slaughter. He had slaughtered a sheep – an act punishable by a ten-year sentence. Accustomed as he was to farm work, he found the frantic labor of the camp particularly difficult. Fedya admired the free life of the criminal element in camp, but there was something in his nature that kept him from becoming close to the thieves. His healthy peasant upbringing and love – rather than revulsion – for work helped him a little. The youngest among us, he immediately became attached to our oldest and most decent member – Ivan Ivanovich.

Savelev had been a student in the Moscow Telegraph Institute and later was my fellow inmate in Butyr Prison. As a loyal member of the Young Communist League, he was shaken by all he had seen and he had written a letter to the party ‘leader’, since he was convinced that someone must be keeping such information from the leader. His own case was so trivial (writing letters to his fiancée) that the only proof of agitation (Article 58, Point 10) consisted of their correspondence. His ‘organization’ (Point 11 of the same article) consisted of two persons. All this was noted down in dead seriousness on the interrogation forms. Nevertheless, even in view of the then prevalent scale of offenses, no one believed he would be condemned to anything more than exile.

Soon after sending the letter on one of the days officially designated for petitions, Savelev was called out into the corridor and given a notice to sign. The supreme prosecutor informed him that he would personally examine his case. After that Savelev was summoned on only one other occasion, to be handed the sentence of the ‘Special Council’ – ten years in the camps.

In camp Savelev was rapidly reduced to a shade of his former self, but even then he could not comprehend the sinister punishment meted out to him. The two of us couldn't have been called friends; we simply loved to remember Moscow together – her streets and monuments, the Moscow River with its thin layer of oil that glistened like mother-of-pearl. Neither Leningrad, Kiev, nor Odessa could boast of such passionate devotees. The two of us could talk endlessly of Moscow…

We set up the iron stove that we had brought with us in the cabin and, although it was summer, lit a fire. The warm dry air was wonderfully aromatic. We were all accustomed to breathing the sour smells of old clothing and sweat. It was a good thing that tears have no odor.

On the advice of Ivan Ivanovich, we took off our underwear and buried it in the ground overnight. Each undershirt and pair of shorts was buried separately with only a small piece protruding above the ground. This was a folk remedy against lice. Back at the mine we had been helpless against them. In the morning we discovered that the lice really had gathered on the protruding bits of shirt. Although the land here lay under the permafrost, it nevertheless thawed sufficiently in the summer for us to bury the articles of underwear. Of course, the soil in this area contained more stones than dirt. But even from this soil of ice and stone there grew up dense pine forests with tree trunks so wide that it took three men with outstretched arms to span them. Such was the life-force of the trees – a magnificent lesson given to us by nature.

We burned the lice, holding the shirts up to the burning logs of the fire. Unfortunately this clever method did not destroy the parasites and on the very same day we boiled our underwear furiously in large tin cans. This time the method of disinfection was a reliable one.

It was later, in hunting mice, crows, seagulls, and squirrels, that we learned the magic qualities of the earth. The flesh of any animal loses its particular odor if it is first buried in the ground.

We took every precaution to keep our fire from going out, since we had only a few matches that were kept by Ivan Ivanovich. He wrapped the precious matches in a piece of canvas and then in rags as carefully as possible.

Each evening we would lay two logs on the fire, and they would smoulder till morning without either flaming up or going out. Three logs would have burned up. Savelev and I had learned that truth at our school

desks, but Ivan Ivanovich and Fedya had learned it as children at home. In the morning we would separate the logs. They would flare up with a yellow flame, and we would throw a heavy log on top.

I divided the grain into ten parts, but that was too alarming an operation. It was probably easier to feed ten thousand people with five loaves than for a convict to divide his ten-day ration into thirty parts. Ration cards were always based on a ten-day period. The ten-day system had long since died out on the ‘mainland’, but here it was maintained on a permanent basis. No one here saw any need for Sunday holidays or for the convicts to have ‘rest days’.

Unable to bear this torment, I mixed all the grain together and asked Ivan Ivanovich and Fedya to let me come in with them. I turned all my food into the common pot, and Savelev followed my example.

The four of us made a wise decision – to cook just twice a day. There simply weren’t enough provisions for three meals.

‘We’ll gather fruits and mushrooms,’ said Ivan Ivanovich. ‘We can catch mice and birds. And one or two days in every ten we can live on bread alone.’

‘But if we’re to go hungry for one or two days every time we expect a food delivery,’ said Savelev, ‘then how will we be able to resist overeating when the stuff is actually brought?’

We decided to make the food as watery as possible and to eat only twice a day – no matter what. After all, no one would steal from us. We had all received our supplies intact, and we had no drunken cooks, thieving quartermasters, greedy overseers, criminals to take the best pieces, or any of that endless horde of administrators who without fear or any trace of control or conscience were able to pick the convict clean.

We had received all our ‘fats’ in the form of a lump of watery fat, some sugar – less than the amount of gold that I was able to pan – and sticky bread created by the inimitable experts of the heavy thumb who fed the administrators of the bakery. There were twenty different kinds of grain that we had never heard of in the entire course of our lives. It was all too mysterious. And frightening.

The fish that was to take the place of meat according to the ‘replacement tables’ was half-spoiled herring intended to replenish our intensified expenditure of protein.

Alas, even the full ration we had received could not feed us or fill our bellies. We required three times, four times as much, for our bodies had gone hungry for too long. We did not understand this simple truth. We believed in the ‘norms’, and we had never heard the well-known remark made by all cooks – that it is easier to cook for twenty persons than for four. We understood one thing clearly: that we would not have enough food. This did not so much frighten as surprise us. We had to begin work and start cutting a road through the undergrowth and fallen trees.

Trees in the north die lying down – like people. Their enormous bared roots look like the claws of a monstrous predatory bird that has seized on to a rock. Downward from these gigantic claws to the permafrost stretch thousands of tiny tentacles, whitish shoots covered with warm brown bark. Each summer the permafrost retreats a little and each inch of thawed soil is immediately pierced by a root shoot that digs in with its fine tendrils. The first reach maturity in three hundred years, slowly hoisting their heavy, powerful bodies on these weak roots scattered flat over the stony soil. A strong wind easily topples these trees that stand on such frail feet. The trees fall on their backs, their heads pointed away from their feet, and die lying on a soft, thick layer of moss that is either bright green or crimson.

Only the shorter twisted trees, tormented from following a constantly shifting sun and warmth, manage to stand firm and distant from each other. They have kept up such an intense struggle for existence for so long that their tortured, gnarled wood is worthless. The short knotty trunk entwined with terrible growths like splints on broken bones could not be used for construction even in the north, which was not fussy about materials. These twisted trees could not be used even as firewood; so well did they resist the axe, they would have exhausted any worker. Thus did they take vengeance for their broken northern lives.

Our task was to clear a road, and we boldly set about our work. We sawed from sunrise to sundown, felled and stacked trees. Wanting to stay here as long as possible and fearing the gold-mines, we forgot about everything. The stacks grew slowly and by the end of the second difficult day it became evident that we had accomplished little, but were incapable of doing more. Ivan Ivanovich measured the distance from the tip of his thumb to the tip of his middle finger five times along a ten-year-old pine to make a one-meter measuring-stick.

In the evening the foreman came to measure our work with his notched staff and shook his head. We had accomplished 10 percent of the norm!

Ivan Ivanovich tried to make his point and justify our measurements, but the foreman was unyielding. He muttered something about ‘cubic meters’ and ‘density’. And although we were not familiar with the technical methods of measuring wood production, one thing was clear. We would be returned to the camp zone where we would again pass through the gates with their inscription: ‘Work is honorable, glorious, valiant, and heroic.’

In the camp we learned to hate physical labor and work in general.

But we were not afraid. More than that: the foreman’s assessment of our work and physical capacity as hopeless and worthless brought us a feeling of unheard-of relief and was not at all frightening.

We realized we were at the end of our rope, and we simply let matters take their course. Nothing bothered us any more, and we breathed freely in the fist of another man’s will. We didn’t even concern ourselves with staying alive, and ate and slept on the same schedule as in camp. Our spiritual calm, achieved by a dulling of the senses, was reminiscent of the ‘dungeon’s supreme freedom’ and Tolstoy’s non-resistance to evil. Our spiritual calm was always guarded by our subordination to another’s will.

We had long since given up planning our lives more than a day in advance.

The foreman left and we remained to cut a road through the forest and erect new log stacks, but now we did so with greater peace of mind and indifference. We stopped quarrelling over who would take the heavy end when we stacked logs.

We rested more and paid more attention to the sun, the forest, and the pale-blue tall sky. We loafed.

In the morning Savelev and I somehow felled an enormous black pine that had miraculously survived both storm and forest fire. We tossed the saw into the grass. It rang out, striking a stone, and we sat down on the trunk of the fallen tree.

‘Just imagine,’ said Savelev. ‘We’ll survive, leave for the mainland, and quickly become sick old men. We’ll have heart pains and rheumatism, and all the sleepless nights, the hunger, and long hard work of our youth will leave their mark on us even if we remain alive. We’ll be sick without knowing why, groan and drag ourselves from one dispensary to another. This unbearable work will leave us with wounds that can’t be healed, and

all our later years will lead to lives of physical and psychological pain. And that pain will be endless and assume many different forms. But even among those terrible future days there will be good ones when we'll be almost healthy and we won't think about our sufferings. And the number of those days will be exactly equal to the number of days each of us has been able to loaf in camp.'

'But how about honest work?' I asked.

'The only ones who call for honest work are the bastards who beat and maim us, eat our food, and force us living skeletons to work to our very deaths. It's profitable for them, but they believe in "honest work" even less than we do.'

In the evening we sat around our precious stove, and Fedya Shapov listened attentively to Savelev's hoarse voice:

'Well, he refused to work. They made up a report, said he was dressed appropriately for the season…'

'What does that mean – "appropriately for the season"?' asked Fedya.

'Well, they can't list every piece of summer or winter clothing you have on. If it's in the winter, they can't write that you were sent to work without a coat or mittens. How often did you stay in camp because there were no mittens?'

'Never,' Fedya said timidly. 'The boss made us stamp down the snow on the road. Or else they would have had to write that we stayed behind because we didn't have anything to wear.'

'There you have it.'

'OK, tell me about the subway.'

And Savelev would tell Fedya about the Moscow subway. Ivan Ivanovich and I also liked to listen to Savelev, since he knew things that I had never guessed, although I had lived in Moscow.

'Muslims, Fedya,' said Savelev, delighted that he could still think clearly, 'are called to worship by a muezzin from the minaret. Muhammed chose the human voice as a signal to prayer. Muhammed tried everything – trumpets, tambourines, signal fires; nothing pleased him… Fifteen hundred years later when they were choosing a signal to start the subway trains, it turned out that neither the whistle, nor the horn, nor the siren could be heard as easily by the train engineer's ear – with the same precision – as the live voice of the dispatcher on duty shouting, "Ready!" '

Fedya gasped with delight. He was better adapted than any of us to the forest, more experienced than any of us in spite of his youth. Fedya could do carpentry work, build a simple cabin in the taiga, fell a tree and use its branches to make a shelter. In addition, Fedya was a hunter; in his locality people were used to guns from childhood. But cold and hunger wiped out Fedya's qualities, and the earth ignored his knowledge and abilities. Fedya did not envy city dwellers, but simply acknowledged their superiority and could listen endlessly to their stories of the wonders of science and the miracles of the city.

Friendship is not born in conditions of need or trouble. Literary fairy tales tell of 'difficult' conditions which are an essential element in forming any friendship, but such conditions are simply not difficult enough. If tragedy and need brought people together and gave birth to their friendship, then the need was not extreme and the tragedy not great. Tragedy is not deep and sharp if it can be shared with friends. Only real need can determine one's spiritual and physical strength and set the limits of one's physical endurance and moral courage.

We all understood that we could survive only through luck. Strangely enough, in my youth whenever I experienced failure I used to repeat the saying: 'Well, at least we won't die from hunger.' It never crossed my mind to doubt the truth of this sentence. And at the age of thirty I found myself in a very real sense dying from hunger and literally fighting for a piece of bread. And this was a long time before the war.

When the four of us gathered at the spring 'Duskania', we all knew we had not gathered through friendship. We all knew that if we survived we would not want to meet again. It would be painful to remember the insane hunger, the unchecked gastronomic lies at the fire, our quarrels with each other and our identical dreams. All of us had the same dreams of loaves of rye bread that flew past us like meteors or angels.

A human being survives by his ability to forget. Memory is always ready to blot out the bad and retain only the good. There was nothing good at the spring 'Duskania', and nothing good was either expected in the future or remembered in the past by any of us. We had all been permanently poisoned by the north, and we knew it. Three of us stopped resisting fate, and only Ivan Ivanovich kept working with the same tragic diligence as before.

Savelev tried to reason with Ivan Ivanovich during one of the smoking breaks. For us it was just an ordinary rest period for non-smokers since we

hadn’t had any home-made tobacco for a number of years. Still we held to the breaks. In the taiga, smokers would gather and dry blackcurrant leaves, and there were heated convict discussions as to whether cowberry leaves or currant leaves were better. Experts maintained that both were worthless, since the body demands the poison of nicotine, not smoke, and brain cells could not be tricked by such a simple method. But currant leaf served for our ‘smoking breaks’, since in camp the words ‘rest from work’ presented too glaring a contradiction with the basic principles of production ethics held in the far north. To rest every hour was both a challenge and a crime, and dried currant leaf was a natural camouflage.

‘Listen, Ivan,’ said Savelev. ‘I’ll tell you a story. In Bamlag, we were working on the side track and hauling sand in wheelbarrows. It was a long distance, and we had to put out twenty-five meters a day. If you didn’t fill your quota, your bread ration got cut to three hundred grams. Soup once a day. Whoever filled the quota got an extra kilo of bread and could buy a second kilo in the store if he had the cash. We worked in pairs. But the quotas were impossible. So here’s what we did: one day we’d work for you from your trench and fill the quota. We’d get two kilos of bread plus your three hundred grams. So we’d each get one kilo, one hundred and fifty grams. The next day we’d work for my quota. Then for yours. We did it for a month, and it wasn’t a bad life. Luckily for us the foreman was a decent sort, since he knew what was up. It worked out well even for him. His men kept up their strength and production didn’t drop. Then someone higher up figured things out, and our luck came to an end.’

‘How about trying it here?’ said Ivan Ivanovich.

‘I don’t want to, but we’ll help you out.’

‘How about you?’

‘We couldn’t care less, friend.’

‘I guess I don’t care either. Let’s just wait for the foreman to come.’

The foreman arrived in a few days, and our worst fears were realized.

‘OK, you’ve had your rest. Your time is up. Might as well give someone else a chance. This has been a bit like a sanatorium or maybe a health club for you,’ the foreman joked without cracking a smile.

‘I guess so,’ said Savelev:

First you go to the club
And then off to play;

Tie a tag to your toe
And jump in your grave.

We pretended to laugh, out of politeness.

‘When do we go back?’

‘Tomorrow.’

Ivan Ivanovich didn’t ask any more questions. He hanged himself that night ten paces from the cabin in the tree fork without even using a rope. I’d never seen that kind of suicide before. Savelev found him, saw him from the path and let out a yell. The foreman came running, ordered us not to take him down until the investigating group arrived, and hurried us off.

Fedya Shapov and I didn’t know what to do – Ivan Ivanovich had some good foot rags that weren’t torn. He also had some sacks, a calico shirt that he boiled to remove the lice, and some patched felt boots. His padded jacket lay on his bunk. We talked it over briefly and took the things for ourselves. Savelev didn’t take part in the division of the dead man’s clothing. He just kept walking around Ivan Ivanovich’s body. In the world of free men a body always and everywhere stimulates a vague interest, attracts like a magnet. This is not the case either in war or in the camps, where the everyday nature of death and the deadening of feeling kills any interest in a dead body. But Savelev was struck by Ivan Ivanovich’s death. It had stirred up and lit some dark corners of his soul, and forced him to make decisions of his own.

He walked into the cabin, took the axe from one corner, and stepped back over the threshold. The foreman, who had been sitting on a mound of earth piled around the cabin, jumped up and began to shout something. Fedya and I ran out into the yard.

Savelev walked up to the thick, short pine log on which we had always sawed wood. The surface was scarred by the axe, and the bark had all been chopped off. He put his left hand on the log, spread the fingers, and swung the axe.

The foreman squealed shrilly. Fedya ran toward Savelev, but the four fingers had already flown into the sawdust. At first we couldn’t even see them among the branches and fine chips. Crimson blood surged from the stump of Savelev’s hand. Fedya and I ripped up Ivan Ivanovich’s shirt, applied the tourniquet, and bound the wound.

The foreman took us back to camp. Savelev was sent to the first-aid point and from there to Investigations to be tried on a charge of self-mutilation. Fedya and I returned to that same tent which we had left two weeks before with such hopes and expectations of happiness.

The upper berths were already occupied by others, but we didn't care, since it was summer and even better to be lower down. There would be a lot of changes by winter.

I fell asleep quickly, but woke up in the middle of the night. I walked up to the table of the orderly on duty where Fedya was sitting with a sheet of paper in his hand. Over his shoulder I could read:

'Mama,' Fedya wrote, 'Mama, I'm all right. Mama, I'm dressed appropriately for the season…'

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# *The Injector*

To: Comrade A. S. Korolyov,
Director of Mines

*OceanofPDF.com*

# REPORT

In response to your order requesting an explanation of the six-hour period on the twelfth of November of the current year during which the convict work gang No. 4 under my supervision in the Golden Spring Mine stood idle, I report the following:

The air temperature in the morning was sixty degrees below zero. Our thermometer was broken by the on-duty overseer, as I reported to you earlier. Nevertheless, it was possible to determine the temperature, since spit froze in mid-air.

The work gang was brought to the site on time, but could not commence work, since the boiler injector serving our area and intended to thaw the frozen ground wouldn't work.

I have already repeatedly brought the injector to the attention of the chief engineer. Nevertheless, no measures were taken, and the injector has now completely gone to pot. The chief engineer refuses to replace the injector just now. We have no place to warm up, and they won't let us make a fire. Furthermore, the guards won't permit the work gang to be sent back to the barracks.

I've written everywhere I could, but I can't work with this injector any longer. The injector hardly works at all, and the plan for our area can't be fulfilled. We can't get anything done, but the chief engineer doesn't pay any attention and just demands his cubic meters of soil.

Mine Engineer L. V. Kudinov,
Area Chief of the Golden Spring Mine

The following was written in neat longhand obliquely across the report:

1. For refusing to work for five days and thus interfering with the production schedule, Convict Injector is to be placed under arrest for three days without permission to return to work and is to be transferred to a work gang with a penal regimen.

2. I officially reprimand Chief Engineer Gorev for a lack of discipline in the production area. I suggest that Convict Injector be replaced with a civilian employee.

Alexander Korolyov,
Director of Mines

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# *The Apostle Paul*

When I slipped off the slick pole-ladder in the test pit and sprained my ankle, the director realized I would be limping for quite a while. Since the rules wouldn't allow me just to sit around, I was sent as an assistant to Adam Frisorger, our carpenter. We were both quite pleased.

In his 'first life' Frisorger had been a pastor in some German village near Marxstadt on the Volga.* We had met in one of the enormous transit prisons during the typhoid quarantine and had arrived together at this coal-prospecting area. Like me, Frisorger had spent time in the taiga, had been on the brink of death, and had been sent half insane from a mine to the transit prison. We were sent to the coal-prospecting group as invalids, as 'help'. All the working members of the prospecting group were civilians working on contract. True, they were yesterday's convicts, but they had served their sentences. In camp the attitude toward them was condescending, even contemptuous. On one occasion, while we were still on the road, the forty of them hardly managed to scrape up two rubles to buy some home-grown tobacco. Even so, they were already different from us. We all understood that in two or three months they would be able to buy clothing, get something to drink, be issued internal travel passports. Perhaps they would even go home in a year. These hopes gleamed all the brighter when Paramonov, the man in charge of the group, promised them enormous salaries and polar rations. 'You'll all go home in top hats,' he kept saying. As for us convicts, there were no promises of top hats and polar rations.

On the other hand, Paramonov was not rude to us. No one would give him any convicts to work as prospectors, so all he managed to wheedle out of the higher-ups was the five of us as helpers.

None of us knew one another, but when we were presented to Paramonov's bright, piercing gaze, he had reason to be pleased with his

crew. One of us, the gray-mustached Izgibin, was a stove-builder. He was the joker in the crowd, and his wit had not abandoned him even in camp. Thanks to his skill, he was not as emaciated as the rest of us. The second was a one-eyed giant from Kamenets-Podolsk. He presented himself to Paramonov as a ‘steamboat stoker’.

‘So, you must be something of a mechanic,’ Paramonov said.

‘That’s right, I am,’ the stoker responded eagerly.

He had quickly calculated the advantages of working in a civilian prospecting group.

The third was the agronomist, Riazanov. Paramonov was ecstatic over this find. As for the agronomist’s appearance, no importance was attached to the torn rags in which he was clothed. In camp, a man’s worth was never appraised according to his clothing, and Paramonov knew the camp well enough.

I was the fourth. I was neither stove-builder nor handyman nor agronomist, but Paramonov found my great height reassuring, and he decided not to make a fuss by altering the list over one man. He nodded.

The fifth man, however, was acting very strangely. He muttered prayers, covered his face with his hands, and couldn’t hear Paramonov. But this was nothing new for our boss, and he turned to the detail assignment officer standing next to him with a stack of yellow folders containing our ‘cases’.

‘He’s a carpenter,’ the detail assignment officer said, guessing at Paramonov’s question. The reception was over, and we were led away to prospect.

Later Frisorger told me that he had been terrified by his case inspector back at the mine, because when they called for him, he thought he was going to be shot. We lived nearly a year in the same barracks, and we never quarreled – something unusual among convicts both in camp and in prison. Quarrels arise over trivia, and verbal abuse becomes so heated that the only possible sequel appears to be a knife – or at best a poker. But I quickly learned not to pay any attention to these elaborate oaths. Intense feelings would simmer down, and those involved would continue lazily to curse each other, but this was done for appearances – to save face.

Frisorger and I, however, never once quarreled. I think this was his achievement, for there was no one more gentle than he. He offended no one and spoke little. He had a creaky old man’s voice – the kind of voice that a young actor assumes when playing the role of an old man. In the camps,

many attempt (often quite successfully) to appear older and physically weaker than they actually are. This is not the result of a conscious effort on their part but somehow occurs instinctively. It was one of life's ironies that the majority of those attempting to add on years and subtract strength were actually in worse shape than they tried to depict. But there was nothing false in Frisorger's voice.

Every morning and evening Frisorger would pray silently, turning away from the others and staring at the floor. He would take part in the conversation only if it had to do with religion, and that was very seldom, since convicts do not favor religious topics. With all his charm and obscene wit, Izgibin tried futilely to poke fun at Frisorger, who turned aside all Izgibin's witticisms with the most peaceful of smiles. The entire prospecting group liked Frisorger – even Paramonov, for whom Frisorger spent half a year making a writing-desk.

Our cots were next to each other, and we frequently engaged in conversations. Frisorger would wave his arms in childlike amazement whenever he encountered in me a familiarity with any of the popular Gospel tales that he, in his simplicity, thought were known only to a narrow circle of religious believers. Giggling delightedly whenever I revealed any such knowledge, he would grow excited and begin to tell me Gospel stories that I either vaguely remembered or had never known at all. He very much enjoyed these discussions.

Once, while reciting the names of the twelve apostles, Frisorger made a mistake. He called the Apostle Paul the true founder of the Christian religion, its most important theoretician. I knew a little of the biography of this apostle and could not pass up the opportunity to correct Frisorger.

'No, no,' Frisorger said, laughing. 'You just don't know.' And he began to count on his fingers: 'Petrus, Paulus, Markus…'

I told him everything I knew about the Apostle Paul. He listened to me closely without speaking. It was already late and time to sleep. I woke up that night in the flickering smoky light of the kerosene lantern and saw that Frisorger's eyes were open. He was whispering: 'God, help me! Petrus, Paulus, Markus…' He did not sleep until dawn. He left early that morning for work and returned late, when I was already asleep. I was awakened by quiet sobbing – like that of an old man. Frisorger was praying on his knees.

'Is something the matter?' I asked when he had finished praying.

Frisorger found my hand and squeezed it.

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘Paul wasn’t one of the twelve apostles. I forgot about Bartholomew.’ I said nothing.

‘Do my tears surprise you?’ he asked. ‘Those are tears of shame. How could I forget such things? I, Adam Frisorger, need a stranger to point out my unforgivable mistake. No, no, you’re not to blame. It’s my sin, mine. But it’s good that you corrected me. Everything will be all right.’

I barely managed to calm him down, and after that (just before I sprained my ankle), we became even closer friends.

Once when there was no one in the workshop, Frisorger took a soiled cloth wallet from his pocket and gestured to me to come over to the window.

‘Here,’ he said, handing me a tiny, rumpled photograph of a young woman with the inconsequential expression that one often sees in snapshots. The yellow, cracked photograph was lovingly framed with a piece of colored paper.

‘That’s my daughter,’ Frisorger said proudly. ‘My only daughter. My wife died a long time ago. My daughter doesn’t write to me; I guess she doesn’t know my address. I write to her a lot. Only to her. I never show this photograph to anyone. I took it from home. I took it from the chest of drawers six years ago.’

Paramonov had walked silently into the workshop.

‘Your daughter?’ he asked, glancing at the photograph.

‘Yes, sir, it’s my daughter,’ Frisorger answered with a smile.

‘Does she write?’

‘No.’

‘How could she forget her old man? Write up a request for an address search, and I’ll forward it. How’s your leg?’

‘I’m still limping, sir,’ I answered.

‘OK. Keep at it.’ Paramonov left.

From then on, making no further attempt to conceal it from me, Frisorger would lie down on his cot after the evening prayer, take out his daughter’s photograph, and stroke the colored border.

We had lived about a half-year together when one day the mail came. Paramonov was off on a trip, and the mail was being handled by his secretary, the convict Riazanov. Riazanov had turned out to be not an agronomist but an Esperantist, but that didn’t hinder him from expertly skinning dead horses, bending thick iron pipes and filling them with hot

sand heated in the campfire, and carrying on the bookkeeping duties of the supervisor's office.

'Look at this,' he said. 'Look what came for Frisorger.'

In the package was an official document with a request to show convict Frisorger (crime, sentence) his daughter's declaration. A copy of the declaration was enclosed. In it she wrote briefly and simply that she was convinced her father was an enemy of the people and that she renounced him and requested that her relationship to him be regarded as non-existent.

Riazanov twirled the paper in his hands. 'Disgusting,' he said. 'Why did she have to go and do a thing like that? Maybe she wants to become a party member?'

I was occupied with something else. Why would anyone forward this sort of declaration to a convict father? Was it some unusual variety of sadism as when relatives were informed of non-existent deaths? Or was it the simple desire to do everything 'according to the law'? Or perhaps something else?

'Listen, Ivan,' I said to Riazanov. 'Did you register the mail?'

'No, it just came.'

'Give me the package.' I explained the matter to Riazanov.

'But how about the letter?' he said hesitatingly. 'She's sure to write a letter.'

'You can detain the letter as well.'

'OK, take it.'

I crumpled the declaration in my hand and tossed it into the open door of the heated stove.

A month later the letter came – just as short as the declaration – and we burned it in the same stove.

Not long after that I was taken away, and Frisorger stayed behind. I don't know what happened to him. I often thought of him while I still had the strength to remember. I could hear his creaky, excited whisper: 'Petrus, Paulus, Markus…'

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# *Berries*

Fadeev said: ‘Wait, let me talk to him.’ He walked over to me and put his rifle butt up against my head. I lay in the snow, clutching the log that had fallen from my shoulder, for I could not pick it up again to join the column of people descending the mountain. Each man carried a log on his shoulder, some larger and some smaller, and all were in a hurry to get home. Both the guards and the prisoners wanted to eat and sleep; they were all tired of this long winter day. But I was lying in the snow.

Fadeev always used the formal form of address in speaking to the prisoners.

‘Listen, old man,’ he said. ‘Anyone as big as you can carry a log like that. It’s not even a log – just a stick. You’re faking, you fascist. At a time like this, when our country is fighting the enemy, you’re jamming sticks in her spokes.’

‘It’s not me who’s a fascist,’ I said. ‘It’s you. You look in the papers and read how the fascists kill old men. How do you think you’re going to tell your bride about what you did in Kolyma?’

I had reached the stage of absolute indifference. I could not tolerate rosy-cheeked, healthy, well-dressed, full people. I curled up to protect my stomach, but even this was a primordial, instinctive movement; I was not at all afraid of blows to the stomach. Fadeev’s booted foot kicked me in the back, but a sudden warm feeling came over me, and I experienced no pain at all. If I were to die, it would be all the better.

‘Listen,’ Fadeev said when he had turned me face upward with the tips of his boots. ‘You’re not the first one I’ve worked with, and I know your kind.’

Seroshapka, another guard, walked up.

‘Let me have a look at you, so I’ll remember you. What a mean one you are…’

The beating began. When it ended, Seroshapka said: ‘Now do you understand?’

‘I understand,’ I said as I got up and spat out salty, bloody saliva. I dragged the log to the accompaniment of chortles, shouting, and swearing from my fellow prisoners. The cold had gotten to them while I was being beaten.

The next morning Seroshapka led us out to a site where the trees had been cut down the previous winter, to gather anything that could be burned in our cast-iron stoves. The stumps were tall, and we ripped them out of the earth, using long poles as levers. Then we sawed them into pieces and stacked them.

Seroshapka hung ‘markers’ in the few branches still remaining in the area where we were working. Made from braided dry yellow and gray grass, the markers indicated the area beyond which we were not permitted to set foot.

Our foreman built a fire on the hill for Seroshapka and brought him an extra supply of wood. Only the guards could have fires.

The fallen snow had long since been carried away by the winds, and the cold, frosty grass was slippery in our hands and changed color when we touched it. Hummocks of low mountain sweet-brier grew around the tree stumps, and the aroma of the frozen dark lilac berries was extraordinary. Even more delicious than the sweet-brier were the frozen, overripe blue cowberries. The blueberries hung on stubby straight branches, each berry bright blue and wrinkled like an empty leather purse, but containing a dark blue-black juice that was indescribably delicious. By that time of the year, the berries had been touched by frost, and they were not at all like the ripe berries, which are full of juice. The later berries have a much more subtle taste.

I was working with Rybakov, who was gathering berries in a tin can during the rest periods and whenever Seroshapka looked the other way. If Rybakov could manage to fill the can, the guards’ cook would give him some bread. Rybakov’s undertaking began to assume major dimensions.

I had no such customers, so I ate the berries myself, carefully and greedily pressing each one against the roof of my mouth with my tongue. The sweet aromatic juice of the crushed berry had a fleeting narcotic effect.

I never even considered helping Rybakov in his gathering, and he himself would not have desired such aid, since he would have had to share the bread.

Rybakov's can was filling slowly, and we were finding fewer and fewer berries. While working and gathering berries, we had approached the border of the forbidden 'zone', without even noticing it. The markers were hanging right over our heads.

'Look at that,' I said to Rybakov. 'Let's go back.'

Ahead, however, were hummocks of sweet-brier, cowberry, and blueberry… We had noticed them earlier. The marker should have been hanging from a tree which stood two yards farther away.

Rybakov pointed at his can, not yet full, and at the sun, slowly setting on the horizon. Slowly he crept toward the enchanted berries.

I heard the dry crack of a shot, and Rybakov fell face down among the hummocks. Seroshapka waved his rifle and shouted:

'Leave him there, don't go near him.'

Seroshapka cocked his rifle and shot in the air. We knew what this second shot meant. Seroshapka also knew. There were supposed to be two shots – the first one a warning.

Rybakov looked strangely small as he lay among the hummocks. The sky, mountains, and river were enormous, and God only knew how many people could be killed and buried among the hummocks along these mountain paths.

Rybakov's can had rolled far away, and I managed to pick it up and hide it in my pocket. Maybe they would give me some bread for these berries, since I knew for whom they were intended.

Seroshapka calmly ordered us to get in formation, counted us, and gave the command to set off home.

He touched my shoulder with his rifle barrel, and I turned around.

'I wanted to get you,' he said, 'but you wouldn't cross the line, you bastard!'

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# *Tamara the Bitch*

Moses Kuznetsov, our blacksmith, found the bitch, Tamara, in the taiga. Kuznetsov's name means 'blacksmith' in Russian, and he evidently came from a long line of blacksmiths. Not only was Kuznetsov's first name Moses, but so was his patronymic. Jews name a son in honor of his father only (and always) if the father dies before his son is born. As a boy in Minsk, Moses had learned his trade from an uncle, who was a blacksmith just as Moses' father had been.

Kuznetsov's wife was a waitress in a restaurant in Minsk and was much younger than her forty-year-old husband. In 1937, on the advice of her best friend who worked in the buffet, she denounced her husband to the police. In those years this approach was more reliable than any hex or spell and even more reliable than sulphuric acid. Her husband, Moses Kuznetsov, disappeared immediately. No simple shoer of horses, he was a factory blacksmith and a master of his trade. He was even something of a poet, an artisan who could forge a rose. He had made all his tools with his own hands. These tools – pliers, chisels, hammers, anvils – were all unquestionably elegant and revealed a love for his trade and the understanding of a skilled craftsman. It was not just a matter of symmetry or asymmetry, but something deeper – some inherent beauty. Each horseshoe, each nail that Moses made was elegant, and each object produced by his hands bore the mark of a master craftsman. He disliked having to stop work on any article, because he always felt he could give it one more tap, improve it, make it more convenient.

The camp authorities valued him even though a geological team had little use for a blacksmith. Moses sometimes played jokes on the authorities, but because of his excellent work these jokes were forgiven him. Once he told the authorities that drill bits could be tempered more effectively in butter

than in water. The boss ordered him some butter – an insignificant amount, to be sure. Kuznetsov threw a little in the water, and the tips of the steel bits acquired a soft hue that one never saw after normal tempering. Kuznetsov and his hammerman ate the rest of the butter. The boss was soon informed of his blacksmith's tricks, but no punishment was meted out. Later Kuznetsov continued to insist on the high quality of 'butter' tempering and talked the boss out of some lumps of moldy butter. The blacksmith melted down the lumps and produced a sourish butter. He was a good, quiet man and wished everyone well.

The camp director was aware of all the 'fine points' of life. Like Lycurgus, he took steps to ensure that his taiga state would have two medics, two blacksmiths, two overseers, two cooks, and two bookkeepers. One of the medics healed while the other swung a pick in the common labor gang and kept track of his colleague to make sure that he committed no illegal acts. If the medic misused any of the narcotic medical supplies, he was exposed, punished, and sent to the work gang, while his colleague composed and signed a statement indicating that he was the new guardian of the camp medical supplies. And he would move into the medical tent. In the opinion of the mine director, such reserves of 'professionals' not only guaranteed that a replacement would be ready if necessary but also strengthened discipline, which would have deteriorated rapidly if even one of these persons came to feel that he was irreplaceable.

In spite of all this, bookkeepers, medics, and foremen switched jobs rather heedlessly, and in any case never turned down a shot of vodka, even if it was proffered by a provocateur.

The blacksmith selected by the camp director as a 'counterbalance' to Moses never got the chance even to pick up a hammer. Moses was perfect, untouchable, and his skills were superb.

One day, on a path in the taiga, he came upon a wolfish Yakut dog. It was a bitch with a strip of hair worn away on her white breast. She was a hunting dog.

There were no villages or nomadic camps of local Yakut tribesmen nearby, and the dog frightened Kuznetsov when she appeared on the path. He thought she was a wolf, and he ran back along the path, splashing through the puddles. Other prisoners were coming up behind him. The wolf, however, lay on its belly and crawled toward the men, wagging its tail. It was petted, slapped on its emaciated ribs, and fed. The dog stayed with us,

and the reason why she did not risk searching for her former owners in the taiga soon became clear.

She was about to have pups, and on the very first night she dug a pit under the tent. She worked hurriedly, paying no attention to attempts to distract her. Each of the fifty men wanted to pet her, show her affection, and somehow tell her of his own misery.

Even Kasaev, the thirty-year-old geologist who was our foreman and who had been working in Kolyma for ten years, came out with his ever-present guitar to look at our new resident.

‘We’ll call him “Warrior”,’ the foreman said.

‘It’s a bitch, sir,’ Slavka Ganusevich, our cook, responded with overtones of joy in his voice.

‘A bitch? Hmm. In that case we’ll call her “Tamara”.’ And the foreman walked away.

The dog smiled after him and waved her tail. She quickly established good relations with all the necessary people. Tamara understood the role played by Kasaev and Vasilenko, the other foreman in camp. She also knew how important it was to be on good terms with the cook. At night she would take her place next to the night guard.

We soon learned that Tamara would take food only from our hands and, if no one was present, would touch nothing either in the kitchen or in the tent. This moral firmness touched the residents of our settlement, who had seen a lot of things in their lives and had been in a lot of scrapes.

They would open a can of meat and put bread and butter on the floor before Tamara. The dog would sniff the food but would select and carry away the same thing every time – a piece of salted Siberian salmon. It was what she knew best, what she liked most, and probably the safest choice.

The bitch soon whelped six pups in the dark pit. We made a kennel and carried them to it. Tamara was excited for a long time, groveled, wagged her tail, but finally decided that everything was in order and that her puppies were not hurt.

At that time our prospecting group had to move into the mountains about a mile and a half away. That put us about four miles from the base with its storehouse, administrators, and living quarters. The kennel with the pups was moved to the new site, and Tamara would run to the cook two or three times a day to get them a bone. The pups would have been fed anyway, but Tamara didn’t know she could be sure of that.

It so happened that our settlement was visited by a detachment of soldiers on skis who were ‘combing’ the taiga in search of escaped convicts. Winter escape is extremely rare, but we knew that five prisoners had fled from a neighboring mine.

The group was assigned, not a tent like ours, but the only log building in the settlement – the bathhouse. Their mission was too serious for us to even think of protesting, as the foreman, Kasaev, explained to us.

The residents accepted their uninvited guests with the usual indifference and submissiveness. Only one creature expressed any displeasure.

The bitch Tamara silently attacked the nearest soldier and bit through his felt boot. Her hair stood on end, and her eyes gleamed with fearless rage. The dog was driven off and restrained with considerable difficulty.

The chief officer of the detachment, Nazarov, was a man whom we had heard about even earlier. He reached for his automatic rifle to shoot the dog, but Kasaev grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into the bathhouse.

On the advice of the carpenter, Semyon Parmenov, Tamara was fitted with a leather collar and tied to a tree. The guard detachment wouldn’t be with us for ever.

Like all Yakut dogs, Tamara did not know how to bark. She growled and tried, with her old fangs, to bite through the rope. She was no longer the gentle, peaceful Yakut bitch that had spent the winter with us. Her past loomed up in an extraordinary hatred, and it was clear to all that the dog had met the soldiers before.

What sort of forest tragedy sticks in a dog’s memory? Was this terrible past the explanation for her appearance near our settlement?

Nazarov could probably have told us something if he had as good a memory for animals as for people.

After about five days, three of the skiers left, and Nazarov prepared to follow the next morning with one companion and our foreman. They caroused all night, had a last drink at dawn to sober up, and set out.

Tamara growled, and Nazarov retraced his steps, took his automatic rifle from his shoulder, and with one burst shot the dog at point-blank range. Tamara shuddered and fell dead. People were already running from the tents, grabbing axes and crowbars. The foreman rushed to cut off the workers, and Nazarov disappeared into the forest.

Desire is sometimes self-fulfilling. Perhaps the hatred of all fifty men for this ‘boss’ was so passionate and powerful that it became a real force and

caught up with Nazarov.

Nazarov and his assistant left together on skis. They did not follow the frozen riverbed – the best winter road to the highway ten miles from our settlement – but crossed a pass in the mountains. Nazarov feared a chase, and the mountain path was closer. Moreover, he was an excellent skier.

It was already night when they reached the pass. Daylight still clung to the mountain peaks, but the ravines were shrouded in darkness. Nazarov began to descend the mountain, but the forest became thicker. He realized he ought to stop, but his skis drew him on, and he ran into a long, thin larch stump that had been sharpened by time and hidden beneath the snow. The stump entered his stomach and came out his back, ripping right through his overcoat. The second man, who was already far below, reached the highway and sounded the alarm the next day. Two days later Nazarov was found impaled on that same stump, frozen in a pose of flight like a figure in a battle diorama.

Tamara’s hide was stretched and nailed to the stable wall, but they did a bad job with it, and when it dried it seemed so small that no one would have believed she had been a large Yakut hunting dog.

Soon thereafter the forester arrived to assign work credits for the trees that we had felled more than a year earlier. When we were felling the trees, no one gave any thought to the height of the stumps. It emerged that they were higher than the regulations permitted, and we had to cut them down. It was easy work. We gave the forester some grain alcohol and money to buy something in the store. When he left, he asked for the dog skin, which was still hanging on the stable wall. He would use it to make dog-skin mittens with the fur on the outside. He said the bullet-holes in the hide didn’t matter.

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# *Cherry Brandy*

So who cares? I don’t, of late,
Let me tell it to you straight:
Life is candy, cherry brandy,
Ain’t that dandy, sweetie-pie?

Where to a Hellene
Gleamed beauty,
To me from black holes
Gapes shame.

Where Greeks sped Helen
Over waves,
Salt foam spits
In my face.

Emptiness
Smears my lips,
Poverty
Thumbs its nose.

Oh yeah? Oh ho! Oh no!
This ale ain’t no cocktail,
But life is candy, cherry brandy.
Ain’t that dandy, sweetie-pie?

*Osip Mandelstam, March 2, 1931*

The poet was dying. His hands, swollen from hunger with their white bloodless fingers and filthy overgrown nails, lay on his chest, exposed to the cold. He used to put them under his shirt, against his naked body, but there was too little warmth there now. His mittens had long since been stolen; to steal in the middle of the day all a thief needed was brazenness. A dim electric sun, spotted by flies and shackled in a round screen, was affixed to the high ceiling. Light fell on the poet's feet, and he lay, as if in a box, in the dark depths of the bottom layer of bunks that stretched in two unbroken rows all around the walls of the room. From time to time, clicking like castanets, his fingers would move to grasp for a button, a loop, a fold in his pea jacket, to sweep away some crumbs and come again to rest. The poet had been dying for so long that he no longer understood that he was dying. Sometimes a thought would pass painfully, almost physically through his brain, a simple, strong thought – that they had stolen the bread he had put under his head. And this was so acutely terrible that he was prepared to quarrel, to swear, to fight, to search, to prove. But he had no strength for this, and the thought of bread became weaker… And now he was thinking of something else – that they were supposed to take everyone abroad but that the ship was late and that it was a good thing that he was here. And in the same haphazard fashion his thoughts shifted to the birthmark on the face of the barracks orderly.

He spent a large part of his days thinking of the events that filled his life here. The visions that rose before his eyes were not those of his childhood, youth, success. All his life he had been hurrying somewhere. It was wonderful now that he did not have to hurry anywhere, now that he could think slowly. And in a leisurely fashion he began to think of the great monotony of death. He thought of the things that had been understood and described by doctors, before artists and poets had come to them. The face mask of the dying Hippocrates is known to all medical students. This mysterious monotony of movement before death launched Freud into the boldest of hypotheses. Monotony and repetition form the compost essential to science. But as for that which is death, the search was led not by doctors but by poets. It was pleasant to realize that he could still think. The nausea of hunger had long since become a habit. And it was all the same – Hippocrates, the orderly with the birthmark, and his own dirty fingernails.

Life was entering into him and passing out of him, and he was dying. But life came back, his eyes opened, thoughts appeared. Only desires were absent. He had long lived in a world where people were frequently returned to life by artificial respiration, glucose, camphor, caffeine. The dead lived again. And why not? He believed in immortality, in real human immortality. He often thought that there was no biological reason for a man not to live for ever… Old age was merely a curable disease, and if it were not for this still unresolved tragic misunderstanding, he could live for ever. Or at least until he got tired. But he wasn't at all tired of living – even now, in these transit barracks.

The barracks were a harbinger of horror, but not horror itself. On the contrary, the spirit of freedom dwelled here, and this was felt by all. Ahead was the camp, and the prison was a thing of the past. This was the 'peace of travel', and the poet understood this.

There was still another path to immortality, that of the poet Tiutchev:

> Blessed be he who has passed
> through this world
> In its fateful moments.

But though he was evidently not destined to become immortal in his human form, as a physical entity, he had nevertheless earned creative immortality. He had been called the first Russian poet of the twentieth century, and it occurred to him often that this was really true. He believed in the immortality of his verse. He had no pupils, but what poet can tolerate pupils? He had also written prose – badly; he'd written articles too. But only in verse did he find anything that seemed new and important to him. His past life had all been fiction, a book, a fairy tale, a dream; only the present was real.

These thoughts arose calmly, secretly, from somewhere deep within him. There was no passion in these meditations. Indifference had long since possessed him. What trivia this all was, what nit-picking in comparison with the 'evil burden'[*] of life! He was amazed at himself – how could he think of poems when everything was already decided? He knew all this, he knew it better than anyone. Better than who? Who cared about him, and who was his equal? Why did all of this have to be understood? He waited… And he understood.

In the moments when life poured into his body and his clouded, half-open eyes began to see, when his eyelids began to quiver and his fingers to move, in those moments thoughts came to him, but he didn't think they would be his last thoughts.

Life entered by herself, mistress in her own home. He had not called her, but she entered his body, his brain; she came like verse, like inspiration. And for the first time the meaning of the word 'inspiration' was revealed to him in its fullness. Poetry was the life-giving force by which he had lived. Yes, it had been exactly that way. He had not lived for poetry; he had lived through poetry.

Now it was so obvious, so palpably clear that inspiration had been life; on the threshold of death it was revealed to him that life had been inspiration, only that: inspiration.

And he rejoiced that he had learned this final truth.

Everything – work, the thud of horses' hoofs, home, birds, rocks, love, the whole world – could be expressed in verse. All life entered easily into verse and made itself comfortably at home there. And that was the way it should be, for poetry was the Word.

Even now stanzas rose easily, one after the other, in a sort of foreordained but at the same time extraordinary rhythm, although he had not written them down for a long time, and indeed could not write them down. Rhyme was the magnet with which he selected words and concepts. Each word was a piece of the world and lent itself to rhyme, while the whole world rushed past with the speed of a computer. Everything shouted: 'Take me!' 'No, me!' There was no need to search – just to reject. It was as if there were two men – one who composed, who spun the wheel, and another who from time to time stopped the machine. And seeing that he was two men, the poet understood that he was composing real poetry. And who cared if it was written down or not? Recording and printing was the vanity of vanities. Only that which is born selflessly can be without equal. The best was that which was not written down, which was rejected and disappeared, melted without a trace, and only the creative labor that he sensed and could not possibly confuse with anything else proved that the poem had been realized, that beauty had been created. Could he be wrong? Could his creative joy be an error?

He remembered how bad, how poetically helpless Blok's last poems were, and how Blok did not seem to understand that…

The poet forced himself to stop. It was easier to do that here than somewhere in Leningrad or Moscow.

Now he realized that for a long time he had not been thinking at all. Once again life was departing from him.

He had been lying motionless for many hours when he suddenly saw something near him that looked like a shooting target or a geological map. The map was mute, and vainly he strained to comprehend what was depicted on it. After a considerable period of time he realized that he was looking at his own fingers. His fingertips were still stained by the home-made cigarettes that he smoked and sucked to the very end. The pads of his fingers revealed a clear dactyloscopic drawing like the relief map of a mountain. The drawing was identical on all ten fingers – concentric circles like those of a sawn-off tree trunk.

He remembered once how a Chinese man from the basement laundry in the building in which he grew up had stopped him on the street. The man had chanced to take him by one hand, then seized the other. The man turned the palms upward and excitedly shouted something in Chinese. It turned out that he was declaring a child so marked to be unquestionably very lucky. The poet often recalled that sign of luck – especially when he published his first collection of verse. Now he remembered the man without anger or irony; he just did not care.

The main thing was that he still had not died. Incidentally, what did it mean when they said someone has ‘died a poet’? There must be something childishly naïve in such a death. Or something intentional – as in the case of Esenin or Mayakovsky.

‘Died an actor’ – that was more or less comprehensible. But ‘died a poet’?

Yes, he had an inkling of what awaited him. At the transit prison he had understood a lot and guessed at still more. And he rejoiced, rejoiced quietly in his own weakness and hoped he would die. He remembered an argument that had taken place a long time ago, in prison, as to which was worse – camp or prison? No one had the experience to make a judgment, and the arguments were speculative. He remembered the cruel smile of a man who had been brought from camp to the prison. That smile stuck so clear in his memory that he was afraid to recall it.

If he were to die now, he thought, how cleverly he would have deceived those who had brought him here. He’d cheat them of ten whole years. He

had been in exile several years before, and he knew that his name had been entered into special lists for ever. For ever!? The scale by which he measured everything had shifted, so that the meaning of the words changed.

Again he felt a nascent tide of strength, rising just like the tide from the sea, a flood-tide that lasted for many hours. Later came the ebb. But after all, the sea doesn't retreat from us for ever. He would still recover.

Suddenly he wanted to eat, but he lacked the strength to move. Slowly and with difficulty he remembered that he had given today's soup to his neighbor, that that mug of hot water was his only food that day. Except for bread, of course. But the bread had been handed out a very, very long time ago. And yesterday's bread had been stolen. There were some who still had enough strength to steal.

He lay like that – light and ethereal – until morning came. The electric bulb grew dimmer, more yellow, and bread was brought on large plywood trays, as it was brought every day.

But he could not rouse himself any more, and he no longer watched out for the heel of the loaf or cried when he didn't get it. He didn't stuff the bread into his mouth with trembling fingers. The smaller of his two pieces slowly melted in his mouth, and with all his being he felt the taste and smell of fresh rye bread. The bread was no longer in his mouth, although he hadn't managed to swallow or even make a movement with his jaw. The smaller piece had melted and disappeared. It was a miracle – one of many local miracles. No, he was not upset. But when they put the daily ration into his hands, he seized it with bloodless fingers and pressed the bread to his mouth. He bit the bread with teeth loose from scurvy; his gums bled, but he felt no pain. With all his strength he kept pushing it into his mouth, sucking it, tearing it, gnawing…

His neighbors stopped him: 'Don't eat it all. Leave some for later. Later…'

And the poet understood. He opened his eyes wide, not letting the bloodstained bread slip from his dirty, bluish fingers.

'When later?' he said clearly and distinctly. And he closed his eyes.

He died toward evening.

They 'wrote him off' two days later. For two days his inventive neighbors managed to continue getting his bread ration. The dead man would raise his hand like a puppet. So he died before the recorded date of his death – a not insignificant detail for his future biographers.

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# *A Child's Drawings*

They didn't have any lists when they took us out for work assignments – just stood us in groups of five, since not all the guards knew their multiplication table. Any arithmetical computation is tricky when it has to be done with live objects in the cold. The cup of convict patience can suddenly overflow, and the administration knew it.

Today we had easy work, the kind they normally reserve for criminals – cutting firewood on a circular saw. The saw spun, knocking lightly as we dumped an enormous log on to the stand and slowly shoved it toward the blade. The saw shrieked and growled furiously. Like us, it detested working in the north, but we kept pushing the log forward until it split into two, unexpectedly light pieces.

Our third companion was chopping wood, using a heavy blue splitting axe with a long yellow handle. He worked on the thicker pieces from the ends, chopped the smaller ones in half with one blow. He was just as hungry as we were and the axe struck the wood in a feeble fashion, but the frozen larch split easily. Nature in the north is not impersonal or indifferent; it is in conspiracy with those who sent us here.

We finished the work, stacked the wood, and waited for the guards. Our guard was keeping warm in the building for which we'd been chopping wood, but we were supposed to march back in formation, breaking up in town into smaller groups.

We didn't go to warm up, though, since we had long since noticed, next to a fence, a large heap of garbage – something we could not afford to ignore. Both my companions were soon removing one frozen layer after another with the adroitness that comes from practice. Their booty consisted of lumps of frozen bread, an icy piece of hamburger, and a torn pair of men's socks. The socks were the most valuable item, of course, and I

regretted that I hadn't found them first. 'Civvies' – socks, scarves, gloves, shirts, pants – were prized by people who for decades had nothing to wear but convict garb. The socks could be darned and exchanged for tobacco or bread.

I couldn't reconcile myself with my companions' success, and I too began to use my hands and legs to break off brightly colored pieces of the garbage pile. Beneath a twisted rag that looked like human intestines, I saw – for the first time in many years – a blue school notebook.

It was an ordinary child's drawing book.

Its pages were all carefully and diligently colored, and I began turning the bright cold naïve pages, grown brittle in the frost. I also used to draw once upon a time, sitting next to the kerosene lamp on the dinner table. A dead hero of fairy tale would come alive at the touch of the magic brush, as if it contained the water of life.

Looking like women's buttons, the water-colors lay in their white tin box, and Prince Ivan galloped through the pine forest on a gray wolf. The pines were smaller than the wolf and Prince Ivan rode him like an Eskimo on a reindeer, his heels almost touching the moss. Smoke spiraled into the blue sky, and the neat Vs of birds could be seen among the stars.

The more I strained to recall my childhood, the more clearly I realized that it would not repeat itself and I would not encounter even a shade of it in the drawing book of another child.

It was a frightening notebook.

The northern city was wooden, its fences and walls painted in a bright ochre, and the brush of the young artist faithfully duplicated the yellow color wherever he wanted to show buildings and creations of man.

In the notebook there were many, very many fences. The people and the houses in almost every drawing were surrounded by even, yellow fences or circumscribed with the black lines of barbed wire. Iron threads of the official type topped all the fences in the child's notebook.

Near the fences stood people. The people in the notebook were not peasants or hunters; they were soldiers, guards, and sentries with rifles. Like mushrooms after the rain, the sentry booths stood at the feet of enormous guard towers. On the towers soldiers walked, their rifle barrels gleaming.

It was a small notebook, but the boy had managed to paint into it all the seasons of his native town.

The ground was bright and uniformly green, as in paintings by the young Matisse, and the blue, blue sky was fresh, pure, and clear. Sunrises and sunsets were conscientiously crimson, and this was no childish inability to capture half tones, color shifts, or shading. Nor was it a Gauguin-type prescription for art where everything that gave an impression of green was painted in the best green color.

The color combinations in the schoolbook were a realistic depiction of the sky in the far north where colors are unusually pure and clear and do not possess half tones.

I remember the old northern legend of how God created the taiga while he was still a child. There were few colors, but they were childishly fresh and vivid, and their subjects were simple.

Later, when God grew up and became an adult, he learned to cut out complicated patterns from his pages and created many bright birds. God grew bored with his former child's world and he threw snow on his forest creation and went south for ever. Thus went the legend.

The child remained faithful in his winter drawings as well. The trees were black and naked. They were the enormous deciduous trees of the Daurian Mountains, and not the firs and pines of my childhood.

The northern hunt was on, and a toothy German shepherd strained at a leash held by Prince Ivan… Prince Ivan wore a military hat that covered his ears, a white sheepskin coat, felt boots, and deep mittens. Prince Ivan had a sub-machine gun slung over his shoulder. Naked, triangular trees were poked into the snow.

The child saw nothing, remembered nothing but the yellow houses, barbed wire, guard towers, German shepherds, guards with sub-machine guns, and a blue, blue sky.

My companion glanced at the notebook and rubbed a sheet between his fingers.

'Find some newspaper if you want to smoke.' He tore the notebook from my hands, crumpled it, and threw it on to the garbage pile. Frost began to form on the notebook…

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# *Condensed Milk*

Envy, like all our feelings, had been dulled and weakened by hunger. We lacked the strength to experience emotions, to seek easier work, to walk, to ask, to beg… We envied only our acquaintances, the ones who had been lucky enough to get office work, a job in the hospital or the stables – wherever there was none of the long physical labor glorified as heroic and noble in signs above all the camp gates. In a word, we envied only Shestakov.

External circumstances alone were capable of jolting us out of apathy and distracting us from slowly approaching death. It had to be an external and not an internal force. Inside there was only an empty scorched sensation, and we were indifferent to everything, making plans no further than the next day.

Even now I wanted to go back to the barracks and lie down on the bunk, but instead I was standing at the doors of the commissary. Purchases could be made only by petty criminals and thieves who were repeated offenders. The latter were classified as ‘friends of the people’. There was no reason for us politicals to be there, but we couldn’t take our eyes off the loaves of bread that were brown as chocolate. Our heads swam from the sweet heavy aroma of fresh bread that tickled the nostrils. I stood there, not knowing when I would find the strength within myself to return to the barracks. I was staring at the bread when Shestakov called to me.

I’d known Shestakov on the ‘mainland’, in Butyr Prison where we were cellmates. We weren’t friends, just acquaintances. Shestakov didn’t work in the mine. He was an engineer-geologist, and he was taken into the prospecting group – in the office. The lucky man barely said hallo to his Moscow acquaintances. We weren’t offended. Everyone looked out for himself here.

‘Have a smoke,’ Shestakov said and he handed me a scrap of newspaper, sprinkled some tobacco on it, and lit a match, a real match.

I lit up.

‘I have to talk to you,’ Shestakov said.

‘To me?’

‘Yeah.’

We walked behind the barracks and sat down on the lip of the old mine. My legs immediately became heavy, but Shestakov kept swinging his new regulation-issue boots that smelled slightly of fish grease. His pant legs were rolled up, revealing checkered socks. I stared at Shestakov’s feet with sincere admiration, even delight. At least one person from our cell didn’t wear foot rags. Under us the ground shook from dull explosions; they were preparing the ground for the night shift. Small stones fell at our feet, rustling like unobtrusive gray birds.

‘Let’s go farther,’ said Shestakov.

‘Don’t worry, it won’t kill us. Your socks will stay in one piece.’

‘That’s not what I’m talking about,’ said Shestakov and swept his index finger along the line of the horizon. ‘What do you think of all that?’

‘It’s sure to kill us,’ I said. It was the last thing I wanted to think of.

‘Nothing doing. I’m not willing to die.’

‘So?’

‘I have a map,’ Shestakov said sluggishly. ‘I’ll make up a group of workers, take you and we’ll go to Black Springs. That’s fifteen kilometers from here. I’ll have a pass. And we’ll make a run for the sea. Agreed?’

He recited all this as indifferently as he did quickly.

‘And when we get to the sea? What then? Swim?’

‘Who cares. The important thing is to begin. I can’t live like this any longer. “Better to die on your feet than live on your knees.” ’ Shestakov pronounced the sentence with an air of pomp. ‘Who said that?’

It was a familiar sentence. I tried, but lacked the strength to remember who had said those words and when. All that smacked of books was forgotten. No one believed in books.

I rolled up my pants and showed the breaks in the skin from scurvy.

‘You’ll be all right in the woods,’ said Shestakov. ‘Berries, vitamins. I’ll lead the way. I know the road. I have a map.’

I closed my eyes and thought. There were three roads to the sea from here – all of them five hundred kilometers long, no less. Even Shestakov

wouldn’t make it, not to mention me. Could he be taking me along as food? No, of course not. But why was he lying? He knew all that as well as I did. And suddenly I was afraid of Shestakov, the only one of us who was working in the field in which he’d been trained. Who had set him up here and at what price? Everything here had to be paid for. Either with another man’s blood or another man’s life.

‘OK,’ I said, opening my eyes. ‘But I need to eat and get my strength up.’

‘Great, great. You definitely have to do that. I’ll bring you some… canned food. We can get it…’

There are a lot of canned foods in the world – meat, fish, fruit, vegetables… But best of all was condensed milk. Of course, there was no sense drinking it with hot water. You had to eat it with a spoon, smear it on bread, or swallow it slowly, from the can, eat it little by little, watching how the light liquid mass grew yellow and how a small sugar star would stick to the can…

‘Tomorrow,’ I said, choking from joy. ‘Condensed milk.’

‘Fine, fine, condensed milk.’ And Shestakov left.

I returned to the barracks and closed my eyes. It was hard to think. For the first time I could visualize the material nature of our psyche in all its palpability. It was painful to think, but necessary.

He’d make a group for an escape and turn everyone in. That was crystal clear. He’d pay for his office job with our blood, with my blood. They’d either kill us there, at Black Springs, or bring us in alive and give us an extra sentence – ten or fifteen years. He couldn’t help but know that there was no escape. But the milk, the condensed milk…

I fell asleep and in my ragged hungry dreams saw Shestakov’s can of condensed milk, a monstrous can with a sky-blue label. Enormous and blue as the night sky, the can had a thousand holes punched in it, and the milk seeped out and flowed in a stream as broad as the Milky Way. My hands easily reached the sky and greedily I drank the thick, sweet, starry milk.

I don’t remember what I did that day nor how I worked. I waited. I waited for the sun to set in the west and for the horses to neigh, for they guessed the end of the work day better than people.

The work horn roared hoarsely, and I set out for the barracks where I found Shestakov. He pulled two cans of condensed milk from his pockets.

I punched a hole in each of the cans with the edge of an axe, and a thick white stream flowed over the lid on to my hand.

‘You should punch a second hole for the air,’ said Shestakov.

‘That’s all right,’ I said, licking my dirty sweet fingers.

‘Let’s have a spoon,’ said Shestakov, turning to the laborers surrounding us. Licked clean, ten glistening spoons were stretched out over the table. Everyone stood and watched as I ate. No one was indelicate about it, nor was there the slightest expectation that they might be permitted to participate. None of them could even hope that I would share this milk with them. Such things were unheard of, and their interest was absolutely selfless. I also knew that it was impossible not to stare at food disappearing in another man’s mouth. I sat down so as to be comfortable and drank the milk without any bread, washing it down from time to time with cold water. I finished both cans. The audience disappeared – the show was over. Shestakov watched me with sympathy.

‘You know,’ I said, carefully licking the spoon, ‘I changed my mind. Go without me.’

Shestakov comprehended immediately and left without saying a word to me.

It was, of course, a weak, worthless act of vengeance just like all my feelings. But what else could I do? Warn the others? I didn’t know them. But they needed a warning. Shestakov managed to convince five people. They made their escape the next week; two were killed at Black Springs and the other three stood trial a month later. Shestakov’s case was considered separately ‘because of production considerations’. He was taken away, and I met him again at a different mine six months later. He wasn’t given any extra sentence for the escape attempt; the authorities played the game honestly with him even though they could have acted quite differently.

He was working in the prospecting group, was shaved and well fed, and his checkered socks were in one piece. He didn’t say hallo to me, but there was really no reason for him to act that way. I mean, after all, two cans of condensed milk aren’t such a big deal.

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# *The Snake Charmer*

We were sitting on an enormous pine that had fallen during a storm. Trees are barely able to hold themselves upright in the inhospitable earth of the permafrost, and storms easily rip them loose, tearing up their roots, toppling them to the ground. Platonov was telling me of his life here – our second life in this world. I frowned inadvertently when the Jankhar mine was mentioned. I myself had been in rotten, difficult places, but Jankhar's terrible fame was everywhere.

'Just how long were you in Jankhar?'

'A year,' Platonov said quietly. His eyes narrowed, and the wrinkles on his forehead became more pronounced. Before me was a different Platonov, older by ten years.

'But I have to admit it was tough only at first, for two or three months. I was the only one there… who could read or write. I was the storyteller for the criminal element in camp; I used to retell novels of Dumas, Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. G. Wells. In exchange they fed and clothed me, and I ate well. You probably made use of that single advantage yourself of an education?'

'No,' I said, 'I never told "novels" for soup. I don't even know what that is. I have heard "novelists" though.'

'Is that a condemnation?' asked Platonov.

'Not at all,' I replied.

'If I survive,' said Platonov, using the same ritualistic formula that introduced any thought concerning things more distant than the next day, 'I'll write a story about it. I even have a title: "The Snake Charmer". How do you like it?'

'It's good, but first you have to survive. That's the main thing.'

Andrei Fyodorovich Platonov, a movie scriptwriter in his first life, died about three weeks after this conversation, died the way many die – swung his pick, stumbled, and fell face down on the stone ground. Proper treatment could probably have returned him to life, because he wheezed on for an hour or more. By the time the stretcher-bearers arrived, he was silent and they carried his small body off to the morgue; he was a frail burden of bones and skin.

I loved Platonov because he didn't lose interest in life beyond the blue seas and tall mountains – the life from which we were separated by so many miles and years. We'd almost ceased believing in the existence of that life, or rather, we believed in it the way schoolboys believe in the existence of America. Platonov possessed some books, God only knows how, and he would avoid the usual conversations – what kind of soup there would be for dinner, would we get bread three times a day or all at once in the morning, would the weather be clear tomorrow.

I loved Platonov, and I will now attempt to write his story – 'The Snake Charmer'.

The end of the working day was by no means the end of work. After the horn sounded, we had to take our tools to the storeroom, turn them in, get in formation, go through two of the ten daily roll-calls to the accompaniment of the guards swearing at us and the pitiless abuse and shouts of those of our comrades who were still stronger than us. They too were exhausted and were in a rush to return home and grew angry over every delay. Then there would be still another roll-call and we would set out in formation for firewood. It was a five-kilometer walk to the forest, since all the nearby trees had long since been cut and burned. There was a work gang of lumbermen to cut the trees, but the mine laborers had to carry a log each. How heavy logs that even two men couldn't carry were delivered – no one knew. Trucks were never sent for logs, and all the horses were sick in their stalls. A horse weakens and falls ill much quicker than a human being. It often seems, and it's probably true, that man was able to raise himself from the animal kingdom because he had more physical endurance than any of the other animals. It's not correct to say that man has 'nine lives' like a cat; instead, one could say of cats that they have nine lives – like a man. A horse can't endure even a month of the local winter life in a cold stall if it's worked hard hours in subzero weather. It's true that the horses of the local

Yakut tribesmen don’t do any work, but then they don’t get fed either. Like the winter reindeer, they dig out last year’s dry grass from under the snow. But man lives on. Perhaps he lives by virtue of his hopes? But he doesn’t have any hope. He is saved by a drive for self-preservation, a tenacious clinging to life, a physical tenacity to which his entire consciousness is subordinated. He lives on the same things as a bird or dog, but he clings more strongly to life than they do. His is a greater endurance than that of any animal.

Such were Platonov’s thoughts as he stood at the gates with a log on his shoulder and waited for a new roll-call. They brought and stacked the logs, and people entered the dark log barracks, hurrying, pushing, and swearing.

When his eyes had become accustomed to the dark, Platonov saw that not everyone, by any means, had been at the work site. On the upper berths in the far corner, about seven men were seated in a circle around two others who sat cross-legged in Tartar style playing cards. They’d taken the only light, a kerosene lantern with a smoking wick that quivered as it lengthened the flame and made their shadows sway on the walls.

Platonov sat down on the edge of a bunk. His shoulders and knees ached, and his muscles were trembling. He had been brought to Jankhar just that morning, and it had been his first day at work. There were no vacant spots on the bunks. ‘When they split up,’ he thought, ‘I’ll lie down.’ He dozed off.

When the game on top ended, a black-haired man with a mustache and a long nail on his left little finger leaned over the edge of the bunk. ‘OK, send that “Ivan” over here.’

A shove in his back awakened Platonov.

‘They’re calling you.’

‘Where’s that Ivan?’ a voice shouted from the upper bunks.

‘My name isn’t Ivan,’ said Platonov, squinting.

‘He’s not coming, Fedya!’

‘What do you mean, he’s not coming?’

Platonov was pushed out into the light.

‘You plan to go on living?’ Fedya asked him quietly as he waved his little finger with the dirty nail before Platonov’s eyes.

‘I plan to,’ answered Platonov.

A fist struck him heavily in the face, knocking him to the ground. Platonov stood up, wiping off the blood with his sleeve.

‘That’s no way to answer,’ said Fedya mildly. ‘I can’t believe they taught you to answer that way at college, Ivan.’

Platonov remained silent.

‘Go over there, scum,’ said Fedya, ‘and lie down next to the shit pail. That’ll be your place. And if you make any commotion, we’ll strangle you.’ It was no empty threat. Platonov had already seen two men strangled with a towel when the thieves were settling scores. Platonov lay down on the stinking boards.

‘How boring, guys!’ said Fedya, yawning. ‘Maybe if I just had someone to scratch my heels…’

‘Mashka, hey Mashka, scratch Fedya’s heels.’

Mashka, a pale pretty boy, dived out into the strip of light. He was a young thief, evidently about eighteen years old.

He pulled off Fedya’s worn yellow boots, carefully took off his dirty worn socks, and, smiling, began to scratch Fedya’s heels. Fedya giggled and squirmed from the tickling.

‘Get out of here,’ he suddenly said. ‘You don’t know how to tickle.’

‘But Fedya, I…’

‘Beat it, I said. All he does is scrape you. No tenderness…’

The men sitting around him nodded their heads in sympathy.

‘I had a Jew in Kosoy – he knew how to scratch! Boy, did he know how to scratch! He was an engineer.’

And Fedya grew pensive thinking about the Jewish engineer who scratched heels.

‘Fedya, Fedya, how about this new one? Why don’t you try him out?’

‘His kind doesn’t know how to scratch,’ said Fedya. ‘Wake him up anyway.’ Platonov was brought out into the light.

‘Fix the lamp, Ivan,’ ordered Fedya. ‘Your job will be to put wood on the fire at night and carry out the pail in the morning. The orderly will show you where to dump it…’

Platonov obediently remained silent.

‘In exchange,’ explained Fedya, ‘you’ll get a bowl of soup. I don’t eat the swill anyway. OK, go back to sleep.’

Platonov lay down in his former spot. Almost everyone was asleep, huddled together in groups of two or three because it was warmer that way.

‘It’s so boring my legs are getting longer,’ mourned Fedya. ‘If only someone could tell a novel. When I was in Kosoy…’

‘Fedya, hey Fedya, how about the new one? Why don’t you try him?’

‘That’s an idea.’ Fedya came to life. ‘Wake him up.’

Platonov was awakened.

‘Listen,’ said Fedya almost obsequiously, ‘I shot my mouth off a little.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Platonov through clenched teeth.

‘Listen, can you tell novels?’

Something flashed across Platonov’s face. Of course, he could! The cell-full of men awaiting trial had been entranced by his retelling of *Count Dracula*. But those were human beings there. And here? Should he become a jester in the court of the duke of Milan, a clown who was fed for a good joke and beaten for a bad one? But there was another way of looking at the matter: he would acquaint them with real literature, become an enlightener. Even here at the very bottom of the barrel of life he would awaken their interest in the literary word, fulfill his calling, his duty. Platonov could not bring himself to admit that he would simply be fed, receive an extra bowl of soup – not for carrying out the slop pail but for a different, a more noble labor. But was it so noble? After all it was more like scratching a thief’s dirty heels than enlightenment.

Fedya waited for an answer, an intent smile on his face.

‘I can,’ Platonov stuttered and smiled for the first time on that difficult day. ‘I can.’

‘Oh, sweetie,’ Fedya livened up. ‘Come on, crawl up here. Have some bread. You’ll eat better tomorrow. Here, sit on this blanket. Have a smoke.’

Platonov hadn’t smoked for a week, and he received an enormous pleasure from the butt with its home-grown tobacco.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Andrei,’ said Platonov.

‘Listen, Andrei, make it something long and spicy. Something like *The Count of Montecristo*. But nothing about bars.’

‘Something romantic, maybe?’ suggested Platonov.

‘You mean Jean Valjean? They told me that one at Kosoy.’

‘How about *The Club of Black Jacks* then? Or *The Vampire*?’

‘There you go. Let’s have the *Jacks*. Shut up, you bastards!’ Fedya shouted.

Platonov coughed.

‘In the city of Saint Petersburg, in the year eighteen hundred and ninety-three, there occurred a mysterious crime…’

It was almost light when Platonov felt he couldn’t go on any more.

‘That’s the end of the first part,’ he said.

‘That was great!’ Fedya said. ‘Lie down here with us. You won’t have much time for sleep; it’s already dawn. You can get some sleep at work. Get your strength up for evening…’

Platonov fell asleep.

They were being led out to work and a tall country boy who had slept through yesterday’s *Jacks* pushed Platonov viciously through the door.

‘Watch out where you’re going, you pig!’

Immediately someone whispered something in the boy’s ear.

When they were getting into formation, the tall boy came up to Platonov.

‘Please don’t tell Fedya I hit you. I didn’t know you were a novelist, brother.’

‘I won’t tell,’ said Platonov.

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# *The Golden Taiga*

The transit prison is known as the ‘minor zone’, and the ‘major zone’ is the Office of Mines, with its endless stockily built barracks, prison streets, triple strands of barbed wire, and guard towers that look like starling roosts in the winter. The minor zone has even more towers, more barbed wire, more locks, and latches, for this is where transit prisoners are kept, and anything can be expected of them.

The architecture of the minor zone is ideal: one enormous square building intended for 500 prisoners and with bunks stacked four high. That means that, if necessary, thousands of convicts can be squeezed in. But it is winter now, and only a few prisoner consignments are being prepared so that the zone seems almost empty inside. The barracks have not yet dried out; a white fog hovers in the room, and ice forms on the insides of the pine-log walls. Over the entrance hangs an enormous, thousand-watt bulb. Owing to the uneven current, the bulb alternates between a dull yellow and a blinding white light.

The zone sleeps during the day. At night the doors open, and people appear under the lamp, holding matches in their hands and calling out names in hoarse voices. Those whose names are called button up their pea jackets, step over the threshold – and disappear for ever. Out there the guards are waiting and the truck motors are coughing. Prisoners are hauled away to mines, collective farms, and road gangs.

I am there too – on a lower bunk near the door. It’s cold down here, but I don’t dare crawl higher, where it’s warmer, since I would only be thrown down. The upper berths are for the strong and, mainly, for hardened criminals. I don’t have the strength anyway to climb the steps which have been nailed to a post. I’m better off down below. If there should be a fight for the lower bunks, I can always crawl under them.

I cannot bite or fight, although I have learned well all the tricks of prison fighting. The limited amount of space – a prison cell, a convict train car, crowded barracks – have dictated the methods of grabbing, biting, breaking. But I just don't have the strength for such tactics. I can only growl and curse. I struggle for every day, every hour of rest. Every part of my body prompts me to act this way.

I am called up the very first night, but I don't tighten the rope that serves as my belt, nor do I button my coat.

The door closes behind me, and I enter the space between the inner and outer doors.

The work gang consists of twenty men – the usual quota for one truck. They are standing at the next door, from which billow clouds of thick, white smoke.

The assignment man and the senior guard look over the men and take a head count. There is another man standing off to the right. He is wearing a quilted coat, felt pants, a fur hat with ear-flaps, and fur mittens, which he beats energetically against his body. He's the one I need. I've been hauled around enough to know the 'law' perfectly.

The man with the mittens is the 'representative' who can accept or reject prisoners.

'Don't take me, sir. I'm sick, and I won't work at the mine. I need to be sent to the hospital.'

The representative hesitates. Back at the mine they told him to select only good workers; they didn't need any other kind. That is why he has come.

The representative looks me over – my torn pea jacket, a filthy buttonless military shirt which reveals a dirty body scratched bloody from louse bites, rags around my fingers, other rags tied with string around my feet (in an area where the temperature drops to seventy-five degrees below zero), inflamed hungry eyes, and an incredibly emaciated condition. He has seen this sort of thing before, and he knows what it means. He takes a red pencil and crosses out my name with a firm hand.

'Go on back, you son of a bitch,' the assignment man says to me.

The door swings open, and I am again inside the minor zone. My place on the bunk has been taken, but I drag out the intruder. He growls from habit but soon calms down.

I fall asleep as if knocked unconscious but awake at the first rustle. I have learned to wake up like a wild man or a beast – without any intermediate

drowsy stage.

When I open my eyes, I see a slippered foot hanging from the upper bunk. The slipper is totally worn out, but it is nevertheless a slipper, and not a regulation-issue shoe. A dirty boy, who has been consorting with the professional criminals in camp, appears before me and addresses someone above me in the effeminate voice cultivated by many of the homosexuals:

‘Tell Valyusha,’ he says to some unseen person on the upper berth, ‘that they brought in some performers…’

After a pause, a hoarse voice responds from above:

‘Valyusha wants to know who they are.’

‘They’re performers from the Cultural Division. A magician and two singers. One of the singers is from Harbin.’

The slipper stirs and disappears. The voice from above says:

‘Bring them here.’

From the edge of my bunk I see three men standing under the lamp – two in pea jackets and one in a fur-lined jacket. The faces of all three express reverence.

‘Which one is from Harbin?’ the voice asks.

‘I am,’ the man in the fur-lined jacket answers.

‘Valyusha says you should sing something.’

‘In Russian? French? Italian? English?’ the singer asks, stretching his neck.

‘Valyusha says it should be in Russian.’

‘What about the guards? Is it all right if I sing quietly?’

‘Don’t worry about them… Do it right – just like in Harbin.’

The singer steps back a few paces and sings ‘The Toreador’ couplets. His breath frosts each time he exhales.

The singing is followed by a deep growl, and the voice from above commands:

‘Valyusha says to sing a song.’

The singer grows pale and tries again:

Whisper, my golden one,
Whisper, beloved,
Whisper, my golden taiga.
Twist and turn, pathways,
One after the other,

Through our free and handsome taiga.

‘Valyusha says that was good,’ the voice utters from above.

The singer sighs in relief. Wet from nervousness, his steaming forehead looks as if it were surrounded by a halo. The singer wipes his brow with his palm, and the halo disappears.

‘Now take off your jacket,’ the voice says. ‘Here’s a replacement.’ A padded coat is tossed down from above.

The singer silently takes off his jacket and puts on the padded coat.

‘You can go now,’ the voice says from above. ‘Valyusha wants to sleep.’

The Harbin singer and his companions disappear in the barracks’ fog.

I move back from the edge of the bunk, curl up, and fall asleep with my hands pushed up in the sleeves of my padded coat. In what seems like no more than a moment, however, I am awakened by a loud, emotional whispering:

‘My friend and I were walking down a street in Ulan-Bator. It was time to eat, and there was a Chinese cafeteria on the corner. We went in and saw they had Chinese meat pies on the menu. I’m from Siberia, and I know our Siberian meat pies – the kind they make in the Urals. But these were Chinese. We decided to order a hundred. The Chinese manager burst out laughing; said that would be a lot and grinned from ear to ear. Well, how about ten? He kept laughing; said that would be a lot. So we ordered two. He shrugged his shoulders, went off to the kitchen, and brought them out. Each one was the size of your hand and had hot grease poured all over it. The two of us ate half of one and left.’

‘Let me tell you what happened to me one time…’

It takes a considerable effort of the will to stop listening and fall asleep again.

The smell of smoke awakens me. Above me, in the criminal kingdom, they are smoking. Someone with a home-made cigar climbs down, and the pungent aroma wakes everyone below.

Again I hear a whispering: ‘You can’t imagine how many cigarette butts there were back at the Party Regional Office in Severnoye. My God, oh, my God! Aunt Polly, our cleaning lady, was constantly complaining that she couldn’t get everything swept up. And I didn’t even understand what a butt was back then…’

I fall asleep again.

Someone jerks my foot. It is the assignment man. His inflamed eyes are furious. At his command, I come out into the yellow strip of light by the door.

‘All right,’ he says, ‘so you don’t want to go to the mine.’

I am silent.

‘How about a warm collective farm, damn you! I’d go myself.’

‘No.’

‘How about a road gang? To tie brooms. Think about it.’

‘I know your brooms,’ I say. ‘Today I tie brooms, and tomorrow they bring me a wheelbarrow.’

‘Just what do you want?’

‘To go to the hospital. I’m sick.’

The assignment man writes something in his notebook and goes away. Three days later a medic comes to the minor zone and calls for me. He measures my temperature, looks at the ulcers on my back, and rubs in some sort of ointment.

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# *Vaska Denisov, Kidnapper of Pigs*

He had to borrow a pea jacket from a friend for this evening's journey. Vaska's own pea jacket was too dirty and torn for him to take two steps through the civilian village. Anyone might stop him.

People like Vaska could pass through the village only two by two, with a guard. Neither the local military types nor the civilian non-convicts liked to see his kind walk alone on the village streets. His kind didn't cause suspicion only when carrying firewood.

A small log was buried in the snow near the garage – next to the sixth telegraph pole from the corner, in the ditch. That had been done yesterday after work.

The driver slowed the truck, and, leaning over the edge of the bed, Vaska slid to the ground. He at once found the place where he had buried the log. The bluish snow was darker there and slightly packed down; you could see that in the early twilight. Vaska jumped into the ditch and kicked the snow aside. The log appeared – gray and flat like a large frozen fish. Vaska dragged the log out on to the road, stood it upright, tapped it to knock off the snow, and bent down to put his shoulder under it as he lifted it with his hands. He strode off to the village, changing shoulders from time to time. He was weak and exhausted, and he warmed up from the exercise right away, but the warmth didn't last long. In spite of the weight of the log, Vaska could not stay warm. Twilight thickened into a white fog, and the village lit all its yellow electric lights. Vaska smiled, pleased with his calculation; in the white fog he would easily reach his goal unnoticed. There was the enormous broken larch tree and the stump, silver in the fog. That meant it was the next house.

Vaska threw the log down by the porch, brushed the snow from his felt boots with his mittens, and knocked at the door, which opened to admit

him. An elderly bare-headed woman in an unbuttoned sheepskin coat stared at him anxiously as if awaiting an explanation.

‘I brought you some wood,’ Vaska said, struggling to spread the frozen skin of his face into the creases of a smile. ‘Could I speak to Ivan Petrovich?’

But Ivan Petrovich was already on the way out, holding the curtain up with his hand.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Where is it?’

‘Outside,’ Vaska said.

‘Wait and we’ll saw it up. Let me get dressed.’ Ivan Petrovich took a long time hunting for his mittens. The two men went out on to the porch and cut the log in half without any saw-horses, holding it between their legs and raising it with their hands when necessary. The saw was dull and badly set.

‘You can come by some other time,’ Ivan Petrovich said, ‘and set the teeth. Here’s a splitting axe. Bring it right into the apartment when you’re done. Don’t leave it in the corridor.’

Vaska’s head was spinning from hunger, but he split the log into smaller pieces and carried them all into the house.

‘Well, that’s all,’ the woman said, coming out from behind the curtain. ‘That’s all.’

Vaska would not leave but stood shifting from one foot to the other. Ivan Petrovich appeared again.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘I don’t have any bread just now. We gave all the soup to the pigs, so I don’t have anything to give you. You can drop by next week…’

Vaska remained silent but would not leave.

Ivan Petrovich searched through his wallet.

‘Here’s three rubles for you. Just for you, for such good wood. As for tobacco, you know it’s really expensive nowadays.’

Vaska stuck the wrinkled three-ruble note inside his shirt and left. Three rubles wouldn’t buy even a pinch of tobacco.

Nauseous from hunger, he remained standing on the porch. The pigs had eaten Vaska’s bread and soup. Vaska took out the green three-ruble note and tore it into tiny shreds. For a long time shreds of paper, seized by the wind, blew along the shining, polished snow crust. And when the last fragments had disappeared in the white fog, Vaska stepped down from the porch. Swaying slightly from weakness, he walked – not home, but through the

village. He kept walking and walking – past one-storied, two-storied, and three-storied palaces…

He walked up to the first porch and jerked the door handle. The door squeaked and gave way. Vaska walked into a dark corridor dimly lit by a dull electric bulb. He walked past the apartment doors. At the end of the corridor was a storage room, and Vaska leaned against the door, opened it, and stepped over the threshold. In the storeroom stood some sacks of onion, and perhaps salt. Vaska ripped open one of the sacks – barley. Angry and excited, he sank his shoulder into the sack and pushed it aside. Under the sack lay frozen hog carcasses. Vaska yelped with joy, but he was too weak to tear even a hunk from one of the carcasses. Farther back, under the sacks, lay frozen suckling pigs, and Vaska could see nothing else. He ripped free one of the frozen suckling pigs and, holding it in his arms like a baby, moved toward the door. But people were already coming out of the rooms, and white fog was filling the corridor. Someone shouted ‘Stop!’ and dived at his legs. Vaska jumped upward, clutching the piglet in his arms, and ran out into the street. The residents of the house ran after him. Someone shot at him, someone bellowed like a beast, but Vaska ran on, seeing nothing. In a few minutes he realized that his legs were taking him of their own accord to the only official building that he knew in the village – the headquarters for ‘vitamin’ expeditions, where Vaska had himself once worked as a gatherer of dwarf cedar, the needles of which were boiled for vitamin C.

The chase was close. Leaping up on to the porch, Vaska pushed the man on duty aside, and rushed down the corridor, the crowd hot on his heels. He ran to the office of the recreation officer and from there fled through a different door – to the lounge. There was no place else to run. Only then did Vaska realize that he had lost his hat. The frozen piglet was still in his hands. Vaska put the pig down, overturned the massive benches, and propped the door shut with them. Then he dragged the podium up against the doors as well. Someone shook the door handle, and silence ensued.

There and then Vaska sat down on the floor, took the raw piglet in both hands and started to gnaw.

When the guards arrived, the doors were opened, and the barricade was removed. Vaska had eaten half of the pig.

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# *A Day Off*

Two squirrels the color of the sky but with black faces and tails were totally absorbed by something going on beyond the silver larch trees. I walked nearly up to their tree before they noticed me. Their claws scratched at the bark, and their blue shadows scampered upward. Somewhere high above they fell silent, fragments of bark stopped falling on the snow, and I saw what they had been watching.

A man was praying in the forest clearing. His cloth hat lay at his feet, and the frost had already whitened his close-cropped head. There was an extraordinary expression on his face – the kind people have when they recollect something extremely precious, such as childhood. The man crossed himself with quick, broad gestures as if using his fingers to pull his head down. His expression so altered his features that I did not immediately recognize him. It was the convict Zamiatin, a priest who lived in the same barracks as I.

He had not yet seen me, and his lips, numb from the cold, were quietly and solemnly pronouncing the words that I had learned as a child. Zamiatin was saying mass in the silver forest.

Slowly he crossed himself, straightened up, and saw me. Solemnity and tranquility disappeared from his face, and the accustomed wrinkles returning to his forehead drew his eyebrows together. Zamiatin did not like mockery. He picked up his hat, shook it, and put it on.

‘You were saying the liturgy,’ I said.

‘No, no,’ Zamiatin said, smiling at my ignorance. ‘How could I say mass? I don’t have bread and wine or my stole. This is just a regulation-issue towel.’

He shifted the dirty ‘waffled’ rag that hung around his neck and really did create the impression of a priest’s stole. The cold had covered the towel

with snowy crystals which glimmered joyously in the sun like the embroidery on a church vestment.

‘Besides, I’m ashamed. I don’t know which way is east. The sun rises for two hours and sets behind the same mountain where it rose in the morning. Where is the east?’

‘Is it all that important to know where the east is?’

‘No, of course not. Don’t leave. I tell you, I’m not saying mass, and I can’t say one. I’m simply repeating, remembering the Sunday service. I don’t even know if today is Sunday.’

‘It’s Thursday,’ I said. ‘The overseer said so this morning.’

‘There, you see? No, there is no way I can say mass. It’s just that it’s easier for me this way. And I forget I’m hungry.’ Zamiatin smiled.

I know that everyone has something that is most precious to him, *the last thing that he has left*, and it is that something which helps him to live, to hang on to the life of which we were being so insistently and stubbornly deprived. If for Zamiatin this was the liturgy of John the Baptist, then my *last thing* was verse – everything else had long since been forgotten, cast aside, driven from memory. Only poetry had not been crushed by exhaustion, frost, hunger, and endless humiliations.

The sun set and the sudden darkness of an early winter evening had already filled the space between the trees. I wandered off to our barracks – a long, low hut with small windows. It looked something like a miniature stable. I had already seized the heavy, icy door with both hands when I heard a rustle in the neighboring hut, which served as a tool-shed with saws, shovels, axes, crowbars, and picks. It was supposed to be locked on days off, but on that day the lock was missing. I stepped over the threshold of the tool-shed, and the heavy door almost crushed me. There were so many cracks in the walls that my eyes quickly became accustomed to the semi-darkness.

Two professional criminals were scratching a four-month-old German shepherd pup. The puppy lay on its back, squealing and waving its four paws in the air. The older man was holding it by the collar. Since we were from the same work gang, my arrival caused no consternation.

‘It’s you. Is there anyone else out there?’

‘No one,’ I answered.

‘All right, let’s get on with it,’ the older man said.

‘Let me warm up a little first,’ the younger man answered.

‘Look at him struggle.’ He felt the puppy’s warm side near the heart and tickled him.

The puppy squealed confidently and licked his hand.

‘So you like to lick… Well, you won’t be doing much of that any more. Semyon…’

Holding the pup by the collar with his left hand, Semyon pulled a hatchet from behind his back and struck the puppy on the head with a short quick swing. The puppy jerked, and blood spilled out on to the icy floor of the shed.

‘Hold him tight,’ Semyon shouted, raising the hatchet again.

‘What for? He’s not a rooster,’ the young man said.

‘Skin him while he’s still warm,’ Semyon said in the tone of a mentor. ‘And bury the hide in the snow.’

That evening no one in the barracks could sleep because of the smell of meat soup. The criminals would have eaten it all, but there weren’t enough of them in our barracks to eat an entire pup. There was still meat left in the pot.

Semyon crooked his finger in my direction.

‘Take it.’

‘I don’t want to,’ I said.

‘All right,’ Semyon said, and his eyes ran quickly over the rows of bunks. ‘In that case, we’ll give it to the preacher. Hey, Father! Have some mutton. Just wash out the pot when you’re done…’

Zamiatin came out of the darkness into the yellow light of the smoking kerosene lantern, took the pot, and disappeared. Five minutes later he returned with a washed pot.

‘So quick?’ Semyon asked with interest. ‘You gobbled things down quick as a seagull. That wasn’t mutton, preacher, but dog meat. Remember the dog “North” that used to visit you all the time?’

Zamiatin stared wordlessly at Semyon, turned around, and walked out. I followed him. Zamiatin was standing in the snow, just beyond the doors. He was vomiting. In the light of the moon his face seemed leaden. Sticky spittle was hanging from his blue lips. Zamiatin wiped his mouth with his sleeve and glared at me angrily.

‘They’re rotten,’ I said.

‘Of course,’ Zamiatin replied. ‘But the meat was delicious – no worse than mutton.’

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# *Dominoes*

The orderlies lifted me off the scales, but their cold, powerful hands would not let me touch the ground.

‘How much?’ the doctor shouted, dipping his pen into the ink-well with a click.

‘One hundred and six pounds.’

They put me on the stretcher. My height was six feet, and my normal weight was 177 pounds. Bones constitute forty-two percent of a man’s total weight, seventy-four pounds in my case. On that icy evening I had only thirty-two pounds of skin, organs, and brain. I was unable to make this calculation at the time, but I vaguely realized that the doctor peering at me from under his eyebrows was doing precisely that.

He unlocked the desk drawer, carefully pulled out a thermometer, leaned over me, and gently placed it under my left armpit. Immediately one of the orderlies pressed my arm to my chest, and the other grasped my left wrist with both hands. Later I came to understand these carefully planned movements; there was only one thermometer in the hospital of a hundred beds. The value of this piece of glass was measured on a totally new scale; it was treasured as if it were a rare jewel. Only the very seriously ill and new patients could have their temperature taken with this instrument. The temperature of recovering patients was recorded ‘according to their pulse’, and only in instances of doubt was the desk drawer unlocked.

The wind-up clock on the wall chimed ten o’clock, and the doctor carefully extracted the thermometer. The orderlies’ hands relaxed.

‘93.7 degrees,’ the doctor said. ‘Can you answer?’

I indicated with my eyes that I could. I was saving my strength. I could only pronounce words slowly and with difficulty, as if translating from a foreign language. I had forgotten everything. I didn’t even remember what

it was like to remember. They finished recording the history of my disease, and the orderlies easily lifted the stretcher on which I lay face up.

‘Take him to the sixth ward,’ the doctor said, ‘close to the stove.’

They put me next to the stove, on a wooden cot supported by saw-horses. The mattresses were stuffed with branches of dwarf cedar, the needles had fallen off, dried up, and the naked branches protruded menacingly from under the dirty, striped material. Straw dust seeped from the grimy, tightly packed pillow. A thin, washed-out cotton blanket with the word ‘feet’ sewn in gray letters covered me from the entire world. The twine-like muscles of my arms and legs ached, and my frostbitten fingers and toes itched. But fatigue was stronger than pain. I curled up on my side, seized my legs with my hands, leaned my chin against the coarse, crocodile-like skin of my knees, and fell asleep.

I awoke many hours later. My breakfasts, dinners, and suppers were on the floor next to the cot. Stretching out my hand, I grabbed the nearest tin bowl and began to eat everything in the order in which the bowls lay. From time to time I would nibble some of the bread ration. Other patients on similar wooden cots supported by saw-horses watched me swallow the food. They did not ask who I was or where I came from; my crocodile skin spoke for itself. They didn’t want to stare at me, but they couldn’t help it. I knew myself how impossible it was to tear your eyes from the sight of a man eating.

I ate all the food that had been left for me. Then there came warmth, an ecstatic weight in my belly, and again sleep, but not for long this time, since an orderly had come for me. I threw over my shoulders the only gown in the ward. Filthy, burned by cigarette butts, and heavy with the absorbed sweat of hundreds of people, it was also used as a coat. I stuck my feet into enormous slippers and shuffled behind the orderly to the treatment room. I had to go slowly, since I was afraid of falling. The same young doctor stood by the window and stared out at the street through frosty panes shaggy from the ice that had formed on them. A rag hung from the corner of the sill, and water dripped from it, drop by drop, into a tin dinner bowl. The cast-iron stove hummed. I stopped, clinging with both hands to the orderly.

‘Let’s continue,’ the doctor said.

‘It’s cold,’ I answered quietly. The food I had eaten had ceased to warm me.

‘Sit down next to the stove. Where did you work before prison?’

I spread my lips and moved my jaw – my intention was to produce a smile. The doctor understood and smiled in reply.

‘My name is Andrei Mihailovich,’ he said. ‘You don’t need any treatment.’

I felt a sucking sensation in the pit of my stomach.

‘That’s right,’ he repeated in a loud voice. ‘You don’t need any treatment. You need to be fed and washed. You have to lie still and eat. I know our mattresses aren’t feather-beds, but they’re better than nothing. Just don’t lie in one position for too long, and you won’t get bedsores. You’ll be in the hospital about two months. And then spring will be here.’

The doctor smiled. I was, of course, elated. An entire two months! But I was too weak to express this joy. I gripped the stool with both hands and said nothing. The doctor wrote something into my case history.

‘You can go now.’

I returned to the ward, slept and ate. In a week I was already walking shakily around the ward, the corridor, and the other wards. I looked for people who were chewing, swallowing. I stared at their mouths, for the more I rested, the more I wanted to eat.

In the hospital, as in camp, no spoons were issued. We had learned to get along without knives and forks while we were still in prison under investigation, and we had long since learned to slurp up our food without a spoon; neither the soup nor the porridge was ever thick enough to require a spoon. A finger, a crust of bread, and one’s own tongue were enough to clean the bottom of a pot or bowl.

I searched out mouths in the process of chewing. It was an insistent demand of my body, and Andrei Mihailovich was familiar with the feeling.

One night the orderly woke me up. The ward was filled with the usual nocturnal hospital sounds: snoring, wheezing, groans, someone talking in his sleep, coughing. It all blended into a single peculiar symphony of sound – if a symphony can be composed of such sounds. Take me to such a place, blindfolded, and I will always recognize a camp hospital.

On the window-sill was a lamp – a tin saucer with some sort of oil (but not fish oil this time!) and a smoking wick twisted from cotton wool. It couldn’t have been very late. Lights went out at nine o’clock, and somehow we would fall asleep right away – just as soon as our hands and feet warmed up.

‘Andrei Mihailovich wants you,’ the orderly said. ‘Kozlik will show you the way.’

The patient called Kozlik was standing in front of me.

I walked up to the tin basin, washed my hands and face, and returned to the ward to dry them on the pillowcase. There was a single towel for the entire ward, an enormous thing made from an old striped mattress, and it was available only in the mornings. Andrei Mihailovich lived in the hospital, in one of the small far rooms normally reserved for post-operative patients. I knocked at the door and went in.

A heap of books was pushed to the side on the table. The books were alien, hostile, superfluous. Next to the books stood a teapot, two tin mugs, a bowl full of some sort of kasha…

‘Feel like playing dominoes?’ Andrei Mihailovich asked, peering at me in a friendly fashion. ‘If you have the time…’

I hate dominoes. Of all games, it is the most stupid, senseless, and boring. Even a card game like lotto is more interesting. For that matter, any card game is better. Best of all would have been checkers or chess. I squinted at the cupboard to see if there wasn’t a chessboard there, but there wasn’t. I just couldn’t offend Andrei Mihailovich with a refusal. I had to amuse him, to pay back good with good. I had never played dominoes in my life, but I was convinced that no great wisdom was required to learn this art.

‘Let’s have some tea,’ Andrei Mihailovich said. ‘Here’s the sugar. Don’t be embarrassed; take as much as you like. Help yourself to the kasha and tell me about anything you like. But then I guess you can’t do both things at the same time.’

I ate the kasha and the bread and drank three mugs of tea with sugar. I had not seen sugar for several years. I felt warm.

Andrei Mihailovich mixed the dominoes. I knew that the one who had the double six began the game. Andrei Mihailovich had it. Then, in turns, the players had to attach pieces with the matching number of dots. That was all there was to it, and I began to play without hesitation, sweating and constantly hiccuping from fullness.

We played on Andrei Mihailovich’s bed, and I got pleasure from looking at the blindingly white pillowcase on the down pillow. It was a physical pleasure to look at the clean pillow, to see another man rumple it with his hand.

‘Our game,’ I said, ‘is lacking its main appeal. Domino players are supposed to smack their pieces down on the table when they play.’ I was not joking. It was this particular aspect of the game that struck me as the most crucial.

‘Let’s switch to the table,’ Andrei Mihailovich said affably.

‘No, that’s all right. I’m just recalling all the various pleasures of the game.’

The game continued slowly. We were more concerned with telling each other our life histories. As a doctor, Andrei Mihailovich had never been in the general work gang at the mines and had only seen the mines as they were reflected in their human waste, cast out from the hospital or the morgue. I too was a by-product of the mine.

‘So you won,’ Andrei Mihailovich said. ‘Congratulations! For a prize I present you with – this.’ He took from the night table a plastic cigarette case. ‘You probably haven’t smoked for a long time?’

He tore off a piece of newspaper and rolled a cigarette. There’s nothing better than newspaper for home-grown tobacco. The traces of typographic ink not only don’t spoil the bouquet of the home-grown tobacco but even heighten it in the best fashion. I touched a piece of paper to the glowing coals in the stove and lit up, greedily inhaling the nauseatingly sweet smoke.

It was really tough to lay your hands on tobacco, and I should have quit smoking long ago. But even though conditions were what might be called ‘appropriate’, I never did quit. It was terrible even to imagine that I could lose this single great convict joy.

‘Good night,’ Andrei Mihailovich said, smiling. ‘I was going to go to bed, but I so wanted to play a game. I really appreciate it.’

I walked out of his room into the dark corridor and found someone standing in my path near the wall. I recognized Kozlik’s silhouette.

‘It’s you. What are you doing here?’

‘I wanted a smoke. Did he give you any?’

I was ashamed of my greed, ashamed that I had not thought of Kozlik or anyone else in the ward, that I had not brought them a butt, or a crust of bread, a little kasha.

Kozlik had waited several hours in the dark corridor.

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# *Shock Therapy*

During one blissful period in his life Merzlakov had worked as a stable-hand and used a home-made huller – a large tin can with a perforated bottom – to turn oats intended for the horses into human food. When boiled, the bitter mixture could satisfy hunger. Large workhorses from the mainland were given twice as much oats as the stocky, shaggy Yakut horses, although all the horses were worked an equally small amount of time. Enough oats were dumped in the trough of the monstrous Percheron, Thunder, to feed five Yakut horses. This was the practice everywhere, and it struck Merzlakov as being only fair. What he could not understand was the camp's rationing system for people. The mysterious charts of proteins, fats, vitamins, and calories intended for the convicts' table did not take a person's weight into consideration. If human beings were to be equated with livestock, then one ought to be more consistent and not hold to some arithmetical average invented by the office. This terrible 'mean' benefited only the lightweight convicts who, in fact, survived longer than the others. The enormous Merzlakov – a sort of human analogue to the Percheron, Thunder – felt only a greater gnawing hunger from the three spoons of porridge given out for breakfast. A member of a work gang had no way of supplementing his food supply, and furthermore, all the most important foodstuffs – butter, sugar, meat – never made it to the camp kettle in the quantities provided for by the instructions.

Merzlakov watched the larger men die first – whether or not they were accustomed to heavy labor. A scrawny intellectual lasted longer than some country giant, even when the latter had formerly been a manual laborer, if the two were fed on an equal basis in accordance with the camp ration. Not calculated for large men, the basic nourishment could not be essentially improved even by food bonuses for heightened productivity. To eat better,

one had to work better. But to work better one had to eat better. Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were always the first to die – a phenomenon that the doctors always explained away by claiming that peoples of the Baltic states were weaker than Russians. True, their normal way of life was more dissimilar to that of the camps than was the world of the Russian peasant, and it was more difficult for them. The primary reason, however, was quite different: it wasn't that they possessed less endurance, but that they were physically bigger than the Russians.

About a year and a half earlier, Merzlakov had arrived as a newcomer at the camp. In a state of collapse from scurvy, he had been allowed to work as a stand-in orderly in the local clinic. There he learned that medical dosages were determined according to the patient's weight. New medicines were tested on rabbits, mice, or guinea pigs, and human dosages were then calculated according to body weight. Children's dosages were smaller than adult dosages.

The camp food ration, however, had no relation to the weight of the human body, and it was precisely this improperly resolved question that amazed and disturbed Merzlakov. But before he completely lost his strength, he miraculously managed to get a job as a stable-hand so he could steal oats from the horses to stuff his own stomach. Merzlakov was already counting on surviving the winter. Perhaps something new would turn up in the spring. But it didn't work out that way. The stable manager was fired for drunkenness and the senior groom – one of those who had taught Merzlakov how to make a huller – took his place. The senior groom had himself stolen no small amount of oats in his day, and he knew exactly how it was done. Wanting to impress the administration and no longer in need of oatmeal for himself, he personally smashed all the hullers. The stable hands began to fry or boil oats and eat them unhulled, no longer making any distinction between their own stomachs and that of a horse. The new manager reported this, and several stable hands, including Merzlakov, were put in solitary for stealing oats. From there they were dismissed from the stable and returned to their former jobs – in the general work gang.

In the general work gang Merzlakov soon realized that death was near. He staggered under the weight of the logs he had to carry. The foreman, who had taken a dislike to this husky man, forced Merzlakov to carry the thick end of the log every time. At one point Merzlakov fell and, unable to get up

from the snow, in a moment of decision refused to carry the damn log any farther. It was already late and dark. The guards were hurrying to their political indoctrination session; the workers wanted to return to the barracks, to food; and the foreman was late for a battle at cards. Merzlakov was the cause of the entire delay, and he was punished. At first his comrades beat him, then the foreman beat him, then the guards. The log remained lying in the snow; instead of the log, they carried in Merzlakov. He was freed from work and lay on his berth. His back ached. The paramedic rubbed it with machine grease since there were no rubbing compounds in the first-aid room.

Merzlakov kept waiting, half bent over and insistently complaining of pains in the small of the back. The pain had long since disappeared, the broken rib quickly healed, and Merzlakov was attempting at any price to save himself from being signed out to go back to work. And they didn't sign him out. At one point they dressed him, put him on a stretcher, loaded him into the back of a truck, and transferred him together with some other patients to the regional hospital. There was no X-ray machine there, and it was time to think things over seriously. Merzlakov did precisely that. For several months he lay bent in two and was finally transferred to a central hospital which, of course, had an X-ray machine. There Merzlakov was placed in the surgical division. In the traumatological ward the patients in their simplicity referred to the ward as the 'dramatological' ward, not even realizing the bitterness of the pun.

'This one,' said the surgeon, pointing to Merzlakov's chart, 'we're transferring to you, Peter Ivanovich. There's nothing we can do for him in surgery.'

'But you write in your diagnosis – "ankylosis resulting from a trauma of the spine". What am I supposed to do with him?' asked the neuropathologist.

'Well, yes, ankylosis, of course. What else can I write? After beatings, even worse things turn up. I remember there was an incident at the Sery Mine. The foreman beat one of the men…'

'I haven't got time to listen to your incidents, Seryozha. I ask you, why are you transferring him to me?'

'It's all written down. He has to be examined before we can make up the papers. You poke him with needles for a while, we do the papers, and we

put him on the boat. Let him be a free man.'

'But you did X-rays? You should be able to see any problems without needles.'

'We did X-rays. Take a look.' The surgeon held the dark film negative up to a gauze curtain. 'The devil himself couldn't find anything in that picture. And that kind of smear is all your X-ray technicians will ever produce until we get regular current.'

'What a mess,' said Peter Ivanovich. 'OK, let's let it go at that.' And he signed his name to the history of the illness, giving his consent to transfer Merzlakov to his own ward.

The surgical ward was noisy and confusing. The northern mines were serious business, and the ward was filled with cases of frostbite, sprains, broken bones, burns. Some of the patients lay on the ward floor and in the corridors where one totally exhausted young surgeon with four assistants could only manage three or four hours of sleep a day and had no time to examine Merzlakov carefully. Merzlakov knew that the real investigation would begin in the neuropathological ward.

His entire despairing convict will was concentrated on one thing: not to straighten out. And he did not straighten out, much as he wanted to – even for a moment. He remembered the gold-mine; the cold that left him breathless with pain; the frozen, slippery stones, shiny with frost; the soup he slurped without any spoon; the rifle butts of the guards and the boots of the foremen. And he found within himself the strength not to straighten out. Already it was easier than it had been the first few weeks. Afraid to straighten out in his sleep, he slept little, knowing that all the attendants had orders to keep an eye on him and unmask his duplicity. And after such an unmasking he would be sent to a 'penal mine'. What must such a penal mine be like, if even an ordinary one left Merzlakov with such terrible memories?

On the day after his transfer, Merzlakov was taken to the doctor. The head doctor asked briefly about the origin of the illness and shook his head in sympathy. He remarked in passing that even healthy muscles forced into an unnatural position for many months could become accustomed to the position and a man could make himself an invalid. Then Peter Ivanovich took over the examination. Merzlakov responded at random to needle pricks, pressures, and taps with a rubber hammer.

Peter Ivanovich spent more than half of his time exposing fakers. He, of course, understood the reasons for their conduct. Peter Ivanovich had himself recently been a prisoner, and he was not surprised by the childish stubbornness of the fakers or the primitiveness of their tricks. Peter Ivanovich, a former associate professor at a Siberian medical institute, had laid his own scientific career to rest in those same snows in which the convicts were saving their lives by deceiving him. It was not that he lacked pity for people, but he was more of a doctor than a human being; first and foremost he was a specialist. He was proud that a year of hard labor had not beaten the doctor, the specialist out of him. He understood his task of exposing cheaters – not from any lofty, socio-governmental point of view and not from the viewpoint of morality. Rather, he saw in this activity a worthy application of his knowledge, his psychological ability to set traps, into which hungry, half-insane people were to fall for the greater glory of science. In this battle of doctor and faker, the doctor had all the advantages – thousands of clever drugs, hundreds of textbooks, a wealth of equipment, aid from the guards, and the enormous experience of a specialist. The patient could count only on his own horror before that world from which he had come and to which he feared to return. It was precisely this horror that lent him the strength for the struggle. In exposing any faker, Peter Ivanovich experienced a deep satisfaction. He regarded it as testimony from life that he was a good doctor who had not yet lost his qualifications but, on the contrary, had sharpened them, who could still ‘do it’.

‘These surgeons are fools,’ he thought, lighting up a cigarette after Merzlakov had left. ‘They either don’t know or have forgotten topographic anatomy, and they never did know reflexes. They get along with X-rays alone, and without X-rays they can’t even diagnose a simple fracture. And the bullshit they throw around!’ It was crystal clear to Peter Ivanovich that Merzlakov was a faker. ‘Let him stay for a week. We’ll get all the tests worked up to make sure the formalities have been observed and glue all those scraps of paper into the history of the illness.’ Peter Ivanovich smiled in anticipation of the theatrical effect of the new exposé. In a week a new group of patients would be shipped back to the mainland. The reports were compiled right here in the ward, and the chairman of the board of medical commissioners would arrive to examine personally the patients prepared by the hospital for departure. His role amounted to examining the documents

and checking that the formalities had been observed; an individual examination of the patient took thirty seconds.

‘My lists,’ said the surgeon, ‘contain a certain Merzlakov. The guards broke his back a year ago. I want to send him home. He was recently transferred to Neuropathology. The papers for his departure are ready.’

The chairman of the commission turned to the neuropathologist.

‘Bring in Merzlakov,’ said Peter Ivanovich.

The bent-over Merzlakov was led in; the chairman glanced at him.

‘What a gorilla,’ he said. ‘But I guess there’s no reason to keep that kind around.’ Pen in hand, he reached for the lists.

‘I won’t give my signature,’ said Peter Ivanovich in a clear, loud voice. ‘He’s a faker, and tomorrow I will have the honor to prove that to both you and the surgeon.’

‘Let’s set him aside then,’ said the chairman indifferently, putting his pen down. ‘And, in general, let’s wrap things up. It’s already getting late.’

‘He’s a faker, Seryozha,’ said Peter Ivanovich, taking the surgeon by the arm as they were leaving the ward.

The surgeon withdrew his arm.

‘Maybe,’ he said with a disgusted frown. ‘Good luck in exposing him. I hope you get your kicks out of it.’

The next day Peter Ivanovich gave a detailed report on Merzlakov to the head of the hospital at a meeting.

‘I think,’ he said in conclusion, ‘we’ll expose Merzlakov in two stages. The first will be the Rausch narcosis that you forgot, Seryozha.’ Triumphantly, he turned to the surgeon. ‘That should have been done right away. And if the Rausch doesn’t produce any results, then…’ Peter Ivanovich spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. ‘Then we’ll have to try shock therapy. I assure you, that can be very interesting.’

‘Isn’t that going too far?’ Alexandra Sergeevna asked. She was a heavy woman who had recently arrived from the mainland. Here she ran the tubercular ward – the largest ward in the hospital.

‘Not for that son of a bitch,’ the head of the hospital answered.

‘Let’s wait and see what kind of results we get from the Rausch,’ Peter Ivanovich inserted in a conciliatory fashion.

Rausch narcosis consisted of a stunning dose of ether for a short-term effect. The patient would be knocked out for fifteen or twenty minutes,

giving the surgeon time to set a dislocation, amputate a finger, or open a painful abscess.

The hospital bigwigs, dressed in white gowns, surrounded the operating table at the dressing station where the obedient, stooped-over Merzlakov was brought. The attendants reached for the cotton strips normally used to tie patients to the operating table.

‘No, no,’ shouted Peter Ivanovich. ‘That’s totally unnecessary.’

Merzlakov’s face turned upward, and the surgeon placed the anesthetic mask over it, holding a bottle of ether in his other hand.

‘Let’s begin, Seryozha!’

The ether began to drip.

‘Deeper, breathe deeper, Merzlakov. Count out loud.’

‘Twenty-six, twenty-seven,’ Merzlakov counted in a lazy voice, and, suddenly breaking off his count, started to mutter something fragmented, incomprehensible, and sprinkled with obscenities.

Peter Ivanovich held in his hand the left hand of Merzlakov. In a few minutes the hand fell limp. Peter Ivanovich dropped it, and the hand fell softly on to the edge of the table, as if dead. Peter Ivanovich slowly and triumphantly straightened out the body of Merzlakov. Everyone gasped with amazement.

‘Now tie him down,’ said Peter Ivanovich to the attendants.

Merzlakov opened his eyes and saw the hairy fist of the hospital director.

‘You slime,’ he hissed. ‘Now you’ll get a new trial.’

‘Good going, Peter Ivanovich, good going!’ the chairman of the commission kept repeating, all the while slapping the neuropathologist on the shoulder. ‘And to think that just yesterday I was going to let him go!’

‘Untie him,’ Peter Ivanovich commanded. ‘Get down from that table.’

Still not completely aware of his surroundings, Merzlakov felt a throbbing in his temples and the sickeningly sweet taste of ether in his mouth. He still didn’t understand if he was asleep or awake, but perhaps he had frequently had such dreams in the past.

‘To hell with all of you!’ he shouted unexpectedly and bent over as before. Broad-shouldered, bony, almost touching the floor with his long, meaty fingers, Merzlakov really looked like a gorilla as he left the dressing station. The orderlies reported to Peter Ivanovich that patient Merzlakov was lying on his bed in his usual pose. The doctor ordered him to be brought to his office.

‘You’ve been exposed, Merzlakov,’ the neuropathologist said. ‘But I put in a good word for you to the head of the hospital. You won’t be retried or sent to a penal mine. You’ll just have to check out of the hospital and return to your previous mine – to your old job. You’re a real hero, brother. Made us look like idiots for a whole year.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ the gorilla said without raising his eyes from the floor.

‘What do you mean, you don’t know? We just straightened you out!’

‘Nobody straightened me out.’

‘OK, friend,’ the neuropathologist said. ‘Have it your own way. I wanted to help you out. Just wait. In a week you’ll be begging to check out.’

‘Who knows what’ll happen in a week,’ Merzlakov said quietly. How could he explain to the doctor that an extra week, an extra day, even an extra hour spent somewhere other than the mine was his concept of happiness. If the doctor couldn’t understand that himself, how could he explain it to him? Merzlakov stared silently at the floor.

Merzlakov was led away; Peter Ivanovich went to talk to the head of the hospital.

‘We can handle this tomorrow, and not next week,’ the head of the hospital said upon hearing Peter Ivanovich’s suggestion.

‘No, I promised him a week,’ Peter Ivanovich said. ‘The hospital won’t collapse.’

‘OK,’ the head of the hospital said. ‘We can handle it next week. But be sure to send for me when you do. Will you tie him down?’

‘We can’t,’ the neuropathologist said. ‘He could dislocate an arm or a leg. He’ll have to be held down.’ Merzlakov’s case history in his hand, the neuropathologist wrote ‘shock therapy’ in the treatment column and inserted the date.

Shock therapy consisted of an injection of camphor oil directly into the patient’s bloodstream. The dose was several times that used in hypodermic injections for seriously ill coronary patients. It produced a sudden seizure similar to seizures of violent insanity or epilepsy. The effect of the camphor was a radical heightening of muscle activity and motor ability. Muscle strain was increased incredibly, and the strength of the unconscious patient was ten times that of normal.

Several days passed, and Merzlakov had no intention of voluntarily straightening out. The morning of the date scheduled in the case history

arrived, and Merzlakov was brought to Peter Ivanovich. In the north any sort of amusement is treasured, and the doctor's office was packed. Eight husky orderlies were lined up along the wall. In the middle of the office was a couch.

'We'll do it right here,' Peter Ivanovich said, getting up from behind the desk. 'No sense going to surgical ward. By the way, where is Sergei Fyodorovich?'

'He can't come,' Anna Ivanovna, the physician on duty, said. 'He said he was busy.'

'Busy, busy,' Peter Ivanovich repeated. 'He ought to be here to see how I do his job for him.'

The surgeon's assistant rolled up Merzlakov's sleeve and smeared iodine on Merzlakov's arm. Holding the syringe in his right hand, the assistant inserted the needle into a vein next to the elbow. Dark blood spurted from the needle into the syringe. With a soft movement of the thumb the assistant depressed the plunger, and the yellow solution began to enter the vein.

'Pump it in all at once,' Peter Ivanovich said, 'and stand back right away. You,' he said to the orderlies, 'hold him down.'

Merzlakov's enormous body shuddered and began to thrash about even as the orderlies took hold of him. He wheezed, struggled, kicked, but the orderlies held him firmly and he slowly began to calm down.

'A tiger, you could hold a tiger that way,' Peter Ivanovich shouted in near ecstasy. 'That's the way they catch tigers in the Zabaikal region.' He turned to the head of the hospital. 'Do you remember the end of Gogol's novel, *Taras Bulba*? "Thirty men held his arms and legs." This gorilla is bigger than Bulba, and just eight men can handle him.'

'Right,' the head of the hospital said. He didn't remember the Gogol passage, but he definitely enjoyed seeing the shock therapy.

While making rounds the next morning Peter Ivanovich stopped at Merzlakov's bed.

'Well,' he said. 'What's your decision?'

'I'm ready to check out,' Merzlakov answered.

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# *The Lawyers' Plot*

Into Shmelyov's work gang were raked the human rejects; they were the by-products of the gold-mine. There were only three paths out of the mine: nameless mass graves, the hospital, or Shmelyov's gang. This brigade worked in the same area as the others, but its assignments were less crucial. Here slogans were not just words. 'The Quota Is Law' was understood to mean that if you didn't fill your quota, you had broken the law, deceived the state, and would answer with an additional sentence and even your life. Shmelyov's gang was fed worse, less than the others. But I understood well the local saying, 'In camp a large ration kills, not a small one.' I wasn't about to pursue the large ration of the leading work gang.

I had only recently been transferred to Shmelyov, about three weeks earlier, and I still didn't know his face. It was the middle of winter and our leader's face was wrapped in a complicated fashion with a ragged scarf. In the evening it was dark in the barracks, and the kerosene lantern barely illuminated the door. I don't even remember our gang leader's face – only his voice that was hoarse as if he had caught cold.

We worked the night shift in December, and each night was a torment. Sixty degrees below zero was no joke. But nevertheless it was better at night, more calm. There were fewer supervisors in the mine, less swearing and fewer beatings.

The work gang was getting into formation to march to work. In the winter we lined up in the barracks, and it is torturous even now to recall those last minutes before going into the icy night for a twelve-hour shift. Here, in this indecisive shoving before the half-opened doors with their cold drafts, each man's character was revealed. One man would suppress his shivering and stride directly out into the darkness while another would suck away at the butt of a home-made cigar. Where the cigar came from was a

mystery in a place that lacked any trace of even home-grown tobacco. A third figure would guard his face from the cold wind, while a fourth held his mittens above the stove to accumulate some warmth in them.

The last few men were shoved out of the barracks by the orderly. That was the way the weakest were treated everywhere, in every work gang.

In this work gang I hadn't yet reached the shoving stage. There were people here who were weaker than me, and this provided a certain consolation, an unexpected joy. Here, for the time being, I was still a person. I had left behind the shoves and fists of the orderly in the 'gold' gang from which I had been transferred to Shmelyov.

The gang stood inside the barracks door, ready to leave, when Shmelyov approached me.

'You'll stay home,' he wheezed.

'Have I been transferred to the morning shift?' I asked suspiciously. Transfers from one shift to another were always made to catch the clock's hour hand so that the working day was not lost and the prisoner could not receive a few extra hours of rest. I was aware of the method.

'No, Romanov called for you.'

'Romanov, who's Romanov?'

'This louse doesn't know who Romanov is,' the orderly broke in.

'He's in charge. Clear? He lives just this side of the office. You're to report at eight o'clock.'

'Eight o'clock?'

An enormous wave of relief swept over me. If Romanov were to keep me till twelve, when our shift had its dinner, I had the right not to go to work that day. I felt an aching in my muscles and my body was overcome with exhaustion. But it was a joyous exhaustion.

I untied the rope around my waist, unbuttoned my pea jacket, and sat down next to the stove. As its warmth flowed over me the lice under my shirt began to stir. With bit-off fingernails I scratched my neck and chest. And I drowsed off.

'It's time.' The orderly was shaking me by the shoulder. 'And bring back a smoke. Don't forget.'

When I knocked at Romanov's door, there was a clanking of locks and bolts, a lot of locks and bolts, and some unseen person shouted from behind the door:

'Who is it?'

‘Prisoner Andreev, as ordered.’

Bolts rattled, locks chimed, and all fell silent.

The cold crept under my pea jacket, and my feet lost their warmth. I began to beat one boot against the other. They weren’t the usual felt boots but quilted ones, sewn from old pants and quilted jackets.

Again bolts rattled and the double door opened, allowing light, heat, and music to escape.

I stepped in. The door of the entrance hall was not shut and a radio was playing.

Romanov himself stood before me, or rather I stood before him. Short, fat, perfumed, and quick on his feet, he danced around me, examining my figure with his quick black eyes.

The smell of a convict struck his nostrils, and he drew a snow-white handkerchief from his pocket. Waves of music, warmth, and cologne washed over me. Most important was the warmth. The dutch stove was red hot.

‘So we meet,’ Romanov kept repeating ecstatically, moving around me and waving his perfumed handkerchief. ‘So we meet.’

‘Go on in.’ He opened the door to the next room. It contained a desk and two chairs.

‘Sit down. You’ll never guess why I sent for you. Have a smoke.’

He began sifting through some papers on the desk.

‘What’s your first name?’

I told him.

‘Date of birth?’

‘1907.’

‘A lawyer?’

‘Actually, I’m not a lawyer, but I studied at Moscow Uni…’

‘A lawyer, then. Fine. Just sit tight. I’ll make a few calls and the two of us will get on the road.’

Romanov slipped out of the room, and soon the music in the dining-room was shut off. A telephone conversation ensued.

Sitting on the chair I began to drowse and even to dream. Romanov kept disappearing and reappearing.

‘Listen, did you leave any things at the barracks?’

‘I have everything with me.’

‘That’s great, really great. The truck will be here any minute and we can get on the road. You know where we’re going? To Khatynakh itself, to headquarters! Ever been there? It’s OK, I’m joking, just joking…’

‘I don’t care.’

‘That’s good.’

I took off my boots, rubbed my toes, and turned my foot rags.

The clock on the wall said eleven-thirty. Even if it was a joke – about Khatynakh – it didn’t make any difference: I wouldn’t have to go to work today. The truck roared up, the beams of its headlights sliding along the shutters and touching the office ceiling.

‘Come on, let’s go.’

Romanov had donned a white sheepskin coat, a Yakut fur hat, and colorful boots. I buttoned my pea jacket, retied the rope around my waist, and held my mittens above the stove for a moment. We walked out to the truck. It was a one-and-a-half-ton truck with an open bed.

‘How much today, Misha?’ Romanov asked the driver.

‘Seventy degrees below zero, comrade chief. They sent the night shift back to the barracks.’

That meant they sent our work gang, Shmelyov’s, home as well. I hadn’t been so lucky after all.

‘All right, Andreev,’ said Romanov, dancing around me. ‘Have a seat in back. It’s not far. And Misha will drive fast. Right, Misha?’

Misha said nothing. I crawled up on to the truck bed and clasped my knees with my arms. Romanov squeezed into the cab, and we set off.

It was a bad road, and I was tossed around so much that I didn’t freeze. In about two hours lights appeared, and we drove up to a two-story log house. It was dark everywhere, and only in one window of the second floor was there a light burning. Two sentries in long leather coats stood next to the large porch.

‘OK, we’ve arrived. That’s great. Have him stand here for the time being.’ And Romanov disappeared up the large stairway.

It was two a.m. The lights were extinguished everywhere. Only the desk lamp of the officer on duty burned.

I didn’t have to wait long. Romanov had already managed to change into the uniform of the NKVD, the secret police. He came running down the stairway and began waving to me.

‘This way, this way.’

Together with the assistant of the officer on duty we went upstairs, and in the corridor of the second floor stopped in front of a door bearing a plaque: ‘Smertin, Senior Supervisor, Ministry of Internal Affairs.’ ‘Smertin’ meant ‘death’ in Russian, and so threatening a pseudonym (it couldn’t have been his real name) impressed me in spite of my exhaustion.

‘For a pseudonym, that’s too much,’ I thought, but we were already entering an enormous room with a portrait of Stalin that occupied an entire wall. We stopped before a gigantic desk to observe the pale reddish face of a man who had spent his entire life in precisely this sort of room.

Romanov bent politely over the desk. The dull blue eyes of Senior Supervisor Comrade Smertin fixed themselves on me. But only for a moment. He was searching for something on the desk, shuffling some papers. Romanov’s willing fingers located whatever it was they were looking for.

‘Name?’ Smertin asked, poring over the papers. ‘Crime? Sentence?’

I told him.

‘Lawyer?’

‘Lawyer.’

The pale face looked up from the table.

‘Did you write complaints?’

‘I did.’

Smertin wheezed. ‘About the bread ration?’

‘That and in general.’

‘OK, take him out.’

I made no attempt to clarify anything, to ask any question. What for? After all I wasn’t cold, and I wasn’t working the night shift in the gold-mine. They could do the clarifying if they wanted to.

The assistant to the officer on duty came in with a note, and I was taken on foot through the settlement at night to the very edge of the forest. There, guarded by four towers and three rows of barbed-wire fence, stood the camp prison.

The prison had cells for solitary and group confinement. In one of the latter I related my past history, neither expecting an answer from my neighbors nor asking them about anything. That was the custom – so they wouldn’t think I was a ‘plant’.

Morning came. It was the usual Kolyma morning – without light, without sun, and in no way distinguishable from night. A hammer was struck

against a rail, and a bucket of steaming boiling water was carried in. The guards came for me, and I said goodbye to my comrades. I knew nothing of them.

They brought me back to the same house, which now appeared smaller than it had at night. This time I was not admitted to Smertin's august presence. The officer on duty told me to sit and wait, and I sat and waited until I heard a familiar voice:

'That's fine! That's great! Now you'll get going.' On alien territory Romanov used the formal grammatical address in speaking to me.

Thoughts began to stir lazily in my brain. I could almost feel them physically. I had to think of something new, something I wasn't accustomed to, something unknown. This – new thing – had nothing to do with the mine. If we were returning to the Partisan Mine, Romanov would have said: 'Now we'll get going.' That meant I was being taken to a new place. Let come what may!

Romanov came down the stairs, almost hopping. It seemed as if he were about to slide down the bannisters like a small boy. He was holding a barely touched loaf of bread.

'Here, this is for the road. There's something else too.' He disappeared upstairs and returned with two herring.

'Everything up to snuff, right? That seems to be about all. Wait, I forgot the most important thing. That's what it means to be a non-smoker.'

Romanov went upstairs and again returned with a small pile of cheap tobacco heaped on a piece of newspaper. About three boxes, I determined with a practiced eye. The standard package of tobacco was enough to fill eight matchboxes. That was our unit of measure in camp.

'This is for the road. A sort of dry rations.'

I said nothing.

'Have the guards been sent for?'

'They've been sent for,' the officer on duty answered.

'Have whoever's in charge come upstairs.'

And Romanov disappeared up the stairs. Two guards arrived – one an older man with pock-marks on his face and wearing a tall fur hat of the sort worn in the Caucasian Mountains. The other was a rosy-cheeked youth about twenty years old wearing a Red Army helmet.

'This one,' said the officer on duty, pointing at me.

Both – the young one and the pock-marked one – looked me over carefully from head to toe.

‘Where’s the chief?’ the pock-marked one asked.

‘He’s upstairs. The package is there too.’

The pock-marked man went upstairs and soon returned with Romanov.

They talked quietly, and the pock-marked man gestured in my direction.

‘Fine,’ Romanov said finally. ‘We’ll give you a note.’

We walked out on to the street. Next to the porch, on the same spot where the truck from the Partisan Mine had stood the previous night, was a comfortable ‘raven’ – a prison bus with barred windows. I got in, the barred doors closed, the guards occupied their spots in back, and we set off. For a while the ‘raven’ followed the central highway that slices all of Kolyma in half, but then we turned off to the side. The road twisted through the hills, the motor roared on the slopes, and the sheer, pine-forested cliffs with frosty-branched willow shrubs towered above us. Finally, having wound around several hills, the truck followed a riverbed to a small clearing. The trees were cut down, and the edges of the clearing were ringed with guard towers. In the middle, about three hundred yards away, were other slanted towers and the dark mass of the barracks surrounded with barbed wire.

The door of the small guardhouse on the road opened, and a sentry with a revolver strapped to his waist came out. The bus stopped. Leaving the motor running, the driver jumped out and walked past my window.

‘That really twisted us around. It really is a serpent.’

I was familiar with the name, and if anything, my reaction was even stronger than to Smertin’s name. This was ‘Serpentine’, the infamous pre-trial prison where so many people had perished the previous year. Their bodies had not yet decayed. But, then, they never would in the permafrost.

The senior guard went up the path to the prison, and I sat at the window thinking that now my hour, my turn had come. It was just as difficult to think about death as about anything else. I didn’t draw myself any picture of my own execution; I just sat and waited.

The winter twilight had already set in. The door of the ‘raven’ opened, and the older guard tossed me some felt boots.

‘Put these on.’

I took off my quilted boots, but the felt boots were too small.

‘You’ll never make it in those cloth boots,’ said the pock-marked man.

‘I’ll make it.’

He tossed the felt boots into the corner of the bus.

‘Let’s go.’

The ‘raven’ turned around and rushed away from ‘Serpentine’. From the vehicles flashing past us I soon realized we were back on the main highway. The bus slowed down, and all around I could see the lights of a large village. The bus stopped at the porch of a brightly lit house, and I entered a lighted corridor very similar to the one in Smertin’s building. Behind a wooden barrier next to a wall phone sat a guard with a pistol on his belt. This was the village of Yagodny, named after the head of the secret police. On the first day of our trip we had covered only seventeen kilometers. Where would we go from here?

The guard took me to a far room with a wooden cot, a bucket of water, and a pail that served as a toilet. The door had a hole for observation by the guard.

I lived there two days. I even managed to dry and rewind the bandages on my legs that were festering with scurvy sores.

There was a sort of rural quiet in the regional office of the secret police. I listened intently from my tiny cell, but even in the day it was rare to hear steps in the corridor. Occasionally an outside door would open, and keys could be heard turning in door locks. And there was always the guard – the same guard, unshaven, wearing an old quilted jacket and a pistol in a shoulder holster. It all seemed rather rustic in comparison with gleaming Khatynakh where Comrade Smertin conducted affairs of state. Very, very rarely the telephone would ring.

‘Yes, they’re gassing up. Yes. I don’t know, comrade chief. OK, I’ll tell them.’

Whom were they referring to? My guards? Once a day, toward evening, the door to my cell would open and the guard would bring in a pot of soup, a piece of bread, and a spoon. The main course was dumped into the soup and served together. I would take the kettle, eat everything, and lick the pot clean. Camp habits were strong.

On the third day the pock-marked soldier stepped over the cell threshold. He wore a long leather coat over a shorter one.

‘Rested up? Let’s get on the road.’

I stood on the porch of the regional office, thinking we would again have a closed prison bus, but the ‘raven’ was nowhere to be seen. An ordinary three-ton truck stood before the porch.

‘Get in.’

Obediently I climbed over the side of the bed.

The young soldier squeezed into the cab, and the pock-marked one sat next to me. The truck started up and in a few minutes we were back on the main highway. Where was I being taken? North or south? East or west? There was no sense asking and, besides, the guards weren’t supposed to say. Was I being transferred to a different district? Which one? The truck lurched along for many hours and stopped abruptly.

‘We’ll have dinner here. Get down.’

I got down.

We had come to a cafeteria.

The highway was the aorta and main nerve of Kolyma. Unguarded equipment was constantly being shunted back and forth. Food supplies were always guarded because of the danger of escaped convicts. The guards also provided protection (unreliable, to be sure) from theft by the driver and supply agent.

At the cafeteria one encountered geologists, mine explorers going on vacation with the money they’d earned, and black-market dealers in tobacco and *chifir* – the semi-narcotic drink made of strong tea in the far north. These were the heroes and the scoundrels of the north. All the cafeterias sold vodka. People would meet, quarrel, fight, exchange news, and hurry on. Truck motors would be left running while the drivers took a two- or three-hour nap in the cab. One also encountered convicts in the cafeteria. On their way up into the taiga they appeared as clean, neat groups. Coming back, the dirty broken bodies of these half-dead, no longer human creatures were the refuse of the mines. In the cafeteria were detectives whose job it was to capture escapees. The escapees themselves were often in military uniform. Past these cafeterias drove the black limousines of the lords of life and death – the lives and deaths of both convicts and civilians.

A playwright ought to depict the north in precisely such a roadside cafeteria; that would be an ideal setting. I used the idea later in a story, of course.

I stood in the cafeteria trying to elbow my way through to the enormous red-hot barrel of a stove. The guards weren’t overly concerned that I would attempt to escape, since it was obvious I was too weak for that. It was clear to everyone that such a goner had nowhere to run to in sixty degrees below zero weather.

‘Sit down over there and eat.’

The guard brought me a bowl of hot soup and gave me some bread.

‘We’ll be on our way now,’ said the young one. ‘We’ll leave as soon as the sergeant comes.’

But the pock-marked man didn’t come alone. He was with an older ‘warrior’ (they didn’t call them soldiers back then) in a short coat and carrying a rifle. He looked at me, then at the pock-marked man.

‘Well, I guess that would be all right,’ he said.

‘Let’s go,’ the pock-marked man said to me.

We went to a different corner of the cafeteria. Bent over by the wall sat a man in a pea jacket and a regulation-issue black flannel cap with ear flaps.

‘Sit down here,’ said the pock-marked man. I obediently sat down on the floor next to this man. He didn’t turn his head.

The pock-marked man and the unknown ‘warrior’ left, while the young one, ‘my’ guard, stayed with us.

‘They’re taking a break, you understand?’ the man in the convict hat suddenly whispered to me. ‘They don’t have any right to do that.’

‘They’ve long since lost their souls,’ I said, ‘so they might as well do whatever they like. What do you care?’

The man raised his head. ‘I tell you, they don’t have the right.’

‘Where are they taking us?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know where they’re taking you. I’m going to Magadan. To be shot.’

‘To be shot?’

‘Yes, I’ve already been sentenced. I’m from the Western Division – from Susuman.’

I didn’t like this piece of news at all. But then I didn’t know the procedures for applying capital punishment. Embarrassed, I fell silent. The pock-marked soldier walked up with our new traveling companion. They started discussing something with each other. Now that there were more guards, they treated us more roughly. No one brought me any more soup in the cafeterias.

We drove on for a few hours, and three more prisoners were attached to our group. The three new men were of indeterminate age – like all those who had gone through the hell of Kolyma. Their puffy white skin and swollen faces spoke of hunger, scurvy, and frostbite.

‘Where are they taking us?’

‘To Magadan. To be shot. We’ve already been sentenced.’

We lay bent over in the truck bed, our knees and backs touching. The truck had good springs, the road was well paved so we weren’t tossed from side to side, and soon we began to feel the cold.

We shouted, groaned, but the guard was implacable. We had to reach Sporny before morning. The condemned man begged to be allowed to warm himself even for five minutes. The truck roared into Sporny where lights were already burning.

The pock-marked man walked up: ‘You’ll go to the stockade and be sent on later.’

I felt cold to the marrow of my bones, was numb from the frost, and frantically beat the soles of my boots against the snow. I couldn’t get warm. Our ‘warriors’ kept trying to locate the camp administrator. Finally after about an hour we were taken to the freezing unheated stockade. Frost covered all the walls, and the floor was icy. Someone brought in a bucket of water. The lock rattled shut. How about firewood? A stove?

On that night in Sporny all ten of my toes were again frostbitten. I tried in vain to get even a minute’s sleep.

They led us out in the morning and we got back in the truck. The hills flashed by, and approaching vehicles coughed hoarsely in passing. The truck descended from a mountain pass, and we were so warm that we didn’t want to go anywhere; we wanted to wait, to walk a little on this marvelous earth. It was a difference of at least twenty degrees. Even the wind was warm, almost as if it were spring.

‘Guards! We have to urinate…’ How could we explain to the soldiers that we were happy to be warm, to feel the southern wind, to leave behind the ringing silence of the taiga.

‘OK, get down.’

The guards were also glad to have an opportunity to stretch their legs and have a smoke. My seeker of justice had already approached the guard:

‘Could we have a smoke, citizen warrior?’

‘OK, but go back to your place.’

One of the new men didn’t want to get down but, seeing that the stop was to be an extended one, he moved over to the edge and gestured to me.

‘Help me get down.’

I extended a hand to the exhausted man and suddenly felt the extraordinary lightness of his body, a deathly lightness. I stepped back. The

man, holding on to the edge of the truck bed, took a few steps.

‘How warm!’ But his eyes were clouded and expressionless.

‘OK, let’s go. It’s twenty-two degrees below zero.’

Each hour it got warmer.

In the cafeteria of the village of Belyashka, our guards stopped to eat for the last time. The pock-marked man bought me a kilo of bread.

‘Here, take it. It’s white bread. We’ll get there this evening.’

A fine snow was falling when far below we saw the lights of Magadan. It was about fifteen degrees above zero. There was no wind, and the snow fell straight down in soft wet particles. The truck stopped in front of the regional office of the secret police, and the guards went inside.

A hatless man wearing civilian clothing came out. In his hands he held a torn envelope. With a clear voice and in the manner of a man accustomed to the job, he called out a name. The man with the fragile body crawled to the side at his gesture.

‘To the stockade!’

The man in the suit disappeared into the building and immediately reappeared. In his hands was a new envelope.

‘Constantine Ugritsky! To the stockade! Eugene Simonov! Stockade!’

I didn’t say goodbye to either the guards or the people who had traveled with me to Magadan. It wasn’t the custom.

Only I and my guards now remained at the office porch.

The man in the suit again appeared on the porch with an envelope.

‘Andreev! Take him to the division office. I’ll give you a receipt,’ he said to my guards.

I walked into the building. First of all I looked for the stove. There was a steam radiator. Behind a wooden barrier was a telephone and a man on duty. The room was somewhat shabbier than the one at Comrade Smertin’s in Khatynakh. But perhaps that room had created such an impression on me because it was the first office I had seen in my Kolyma life? A steep staircase led up to the second floor.

The man in civilian clothes who had handled our group out on the street came into the room.

‘Come this way.’

We climbed the narrow stairway to the second floor and arrived at a door with the inscription: Y. Atlas, Director.

‘Sit down.’

I sat down. In the tiny office the most important area was occupied by a desk. Papers, folders, some lists were heaped on it. Atlas was thirty-eight or forty years old. He was a heavy man of athletic build with receding black hair.

‘Name?’

‘Andreev.’

‘Crime, sentence?’

I answered.

‘Lawyer?’

‘Lawyer.’

Atlas jumped up and walked around the desk: ‘Great! Captain Rebrov will talk to you.’

‘Who is Captain Rebrov?’

‘He’s in charge here. Go downstairs.’

I returned to my spot next to the radiator. Having mulled over the matter, I decided to eat the kilo of white bread my guards had given me. There was a tub of water with a mug chained to it right there. The wind-up clock on the wall ticked evenly. Through a half-dream I heard someone walk quickly past me and go upstairs, and the officer on duty woke me up.

‘Take him to Captain Rebrov.’

I was taken to the second floor. The door of a small office opened and I heard a sharp voice:

‘This way, this way.’

It was an ordinary office, somewhat larger than the one in which I had been two hours earlier. The glassy eyes of Captain Rebrov were fixed directly on me. On the corner of the table stood a glass of tea with lemon and a saucer with a chewed rind of cheese. There were phones, folders, portraits.

‘Name?’

‘Andreev.’

‘Crime, sentence?’

I told him.

‘Lawyer?’

‘Lawyer.’

Captain Rebrov leaned over the table, bringing his glassy eyes closer to mine, and asked:

‘Do you know Parfentiev?’

‘Yes, I know him.’

Parfentiev had once been my work gang leader back at the mine before I was transferred to Shmelyov’s group.

‘Yes, I know him. He was my work gang leader, Dmitri Parfentiev.’

‘Good, so you know Parfentiev?’

‘Yes, I know him.’

‘How about Vinogradov?’

‘I don’t know any Vinogradov.’

‘Vinogradov, the director of Far Eastern Ship Construction?’

‘I don’t know him.’

Captain Rebrov lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and said, extinguishing the cigarette in the saucer:

‘So you know Vinogradov and don’t know Parfentiev?’

‘No, I don’t know Vinogradov…’

‘Oh, yes, you know Parfentiev and don’t know Vinogradov. I see.’

Captain Rebrov pushed a button, and the door behind me opened.

‘Take him to the stockade.’

The saucer with the cigarette and uneaten rind of cheese remained on the right-hand side of the desk next to the pitcher of water in Rebrov’s office.

The guard led me through the dark night along the streets of sleeping Magadan.

‘Get a move on.’

‘I have nowhere to hurry to.’

‘Why don’t you chat a little longer?’ The guard took out his pistol. ‘I could shoot you like a dog. It’s no problem to write someone off.’

‘You won’t do it,’ I said. ‘You’d have to answer to Captain Rebrov.’

‘Get moving, you louse!’

Magadan is a small town. Together we reached Vaskov’s House, the local prison. Vaskov was second in charge to Berzin when Magadan was being built. The wooden prison was one of the first in Magadan, and the prison kept the name of the man who built it. Magadan had long since acquired a stone prison built according to the latest word in penitentiary technology, but this new building was also called Vaskov’s House. After some brief negotiations at the entrance I was admitted into the yard of Vaskov’s House. I saw a low, stocky, long building made of smooth heavy planks. Across the yard were two wings of a wooden building.

‘The second one,’ a voice behind me said.

I seized a door handle, opened the door, and walked in.

There were double-width berths packed with people. But it wasn't crowded, not shoulder to shoulder. The floor was earthen. A stove made from half a barrel stood on long metal legs. There was a smell of sweat, disinfectant, and dirty bodies. With difficulty I crawled on to an upper berth where it was warmer and found a free spot. My neighbor woke up.

'Straight from the woods?'

'Yes.'

'With fleas?'

'With fleas.'

'Then lie down in the corner. The disinfection service is working here, and we don't have fleas.'

'Disinfection – that's good,' I thought. 'And mainly, it's warm.'

We were fed in the morning. There was bread and boiling water. I wasn't yet due to get bread. I took off my quilted boots, put them under my head, lowered my padded trousers to keep my feet warm, fell asleep, and woke up twenty-four hours later. Bread was being passed out and I was already registered for meals in Vaskov's House.

For dinner they gave broth and three spoons of wheat kasha. I slept till morning of the next day when the hysterical voice of the guard on duty awakened me.

I crawled down from the bunk.

'Go outside – to that porch over there.'

The doors of the true House of Vaskov opened before me, and I entered a low, dimly lit corridor. The guard turned the lock, threw back the massive iron latch, and disclosed a tiny cell with a double berth. Two men sat bent over in the corner on the lower bunk.

I walked up to the window and sat down. Someone was shaking me by the shoulders. It was my gang leader, Dmitry Parfentiev, whom Rebrov had asked about.

'Do you understand anything?'

'Nothing.'

'When were you brought in?'

'Three days ago. Atlas had me brought in in a small truck.'

'Atlas? He questioned me in the division office. About forty years old, balding, in civilian clothing.'

'With me he wore a military uniform.'

‘What did Captain Rebrov ask you?’

‘Do I know Vinogradov.’

‘Well?’

‘How am I supposed to know him?’

‘Vinogradov is the director of Far Eastern Ship Construction.’

‘You know that, but I don’t know who Vinogradov is.’

‘He and I were students at the same school.’

I began to put two and two together. Before his arrest Parfentiev had been a district prosecutor. Vinogradov, in passing through the area, learned that his university friend was in the mine and sent him some money. He also asked the head of the mine to help Parfentiev. The mine doctor had told Smertin and Smertin told Rebrov, who started an investigation of Vinogradov. All convicts in the northern mines who had formerly been lawyers were brought in. The rest was simply a matter of the usual investigative techniques.

‘But why are we here? I was in wing…’

‘We’re being released,’ said Parfentiev.

‘Released? Being let go, that is, not being let go but being sent to a transit prison?’

‘Yes,’ said a third man, crawling out into the light and looking me over with obvious contempt.

He had a fat repulsive pink face and was dressed in a black fur coat. His voile shirt was open at the chest.

‘So you know each other? Captain Rebrov didn’t have time to squash you. An enemy of the people…’

‘What are you, a friend of the people?’

‘At least I’m not a political prisoner. I was never in the secret police and I never did anything to the working people. But it’s because of your kind that we go to jail.’

‘What are you, a thief?’ I asked.

‘Maybe.’

‘OK, stop it, stop it,’ Parfentiev broke in.

The doors clanked open.

‘Come on out!’

There were about seven men standing at the entrance. Parfentiev and I walked up to them.

‘Are all of you lawyers?’ asked Parfentiev.

‘Yes! Yes!’

‘What happened? Why are we being released?’

Some all-knowing soul said quietly:

‘Captain Rebrov has been arrested. Everyone arrested under his instructions is being released.’

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# *Typhoid Quarantine*

The man in the white gown held out his rosy, washed hand, and Andreev put his sweaty, stiff military shirt into the outstretched fingers. The man jerked back his hand and shook it.

‘I don’t have any underwear,’ Andreev said indifferently.

The orderly then took Andreev’s shirt in both hands, turned the sleeves inside out with an agile, practiced movement, and took one look…

‘He’s full of them, Lydia Ivanovna,’ he said and bellowed at Andreev: ‘How could you let yourself get so lousy?’

But the doctor, Lydia Ivanovna, interrupted him.

‘It’s not their fault,’ she said quietly in a tone of reproach, stressing the word ‘their’, and took a stethoscope from the table.

Andreev remembered this red-haired woman for the rest of his life, thanked her a thousand times, and thought about her with warmth and tenderness. Why? Because she had stressed the word ‘*their*’ in this, the only sentence that Andreev had ever heard from her. He thanked her for a kind word said at the right time. Did she ever learn of his thanks?

The examination was brief and did not require a stethoscope. Lydia Ivanovna breathed on a violet rubber stamp and pressed it to a printed form, leaning on it heavily with both hands. She wrote a few words on it, and Andreev was taken away.

The guard, who had been waiting in the entrance hall, did not take Andreev back to prison but to one of the warehouses in the center of the settlement. The area around the warehouse had a barbed-wire fence with the prescribed ten strands and a gate, next to which stood a sentry wearing a leather coat and holding a rifle. They entered the yard and approached the warehouse. A bright light shone through the crack in the door. The door was made for trucks, not people, and the guard opened it with great difficulty.

The smell of dirty bodies, sour human sweat, and old clothing struck Andreev's nostrils. A muffled hum of human voices filled the vast box. The walls were entirely covered with four-tiered bunks cut from whole larch trees. The bunks were built solidly, to last for ever – like Caesar's bridges. More than a thousand people lay on the shelves of the huge warehouse. This was only one of twenty enormous warehouses packed with living goods. There was a typhoid quarantine in port, and there hadn't been any 'outgoing shipments' for more than a month.

There had been a breakdown in the camp's blood circulation system, whose erythrocytes were living people. Trucks stood idle, and the mines lengthened the prisoners' workday. In the town itself the bakery was not able to keep up with orders. Every prisoner had to receive 500 grams (a little over a pound) of bread per day, and bread was even being baked in private apartments. The authorities were growing ever more bitter over the fact that the town was slowly filling up with convict 'slag' that had been thrown out by the mines in the taiga.

There were more than a thousand human beings in the warehouse to which Andreev had been brought and which bore the then-fashionable title of 'section'. This multitude was not immediately noticeable. On the upper bunks people lay naked in the heat; the prisoners on and beneath the lower bunks wore padded coats, pea jackets and hats. No one will ever explain why a convict almost never sleeps on his side. Most of the men lay on their backs, and their bodies seemed like growths or bumps in the wood, like bent boards in the enormous shelves.

People were clustered in small groups either around storytellers – 'novelists' – or around incidents, and given such a concentration of people, incidents occurred nearly every minute. These men were being kept in the transit camp and had not been sent to work for more than a month. They were sent out only to the bathhouse to disinfect their clothing. Every day the camps lost twenty thousand workdays, one hundred and sixty thousand hours, perhaps even three hundred and twenty thousand hours; workdays vary. Or a thousand days of life were saved. Twenty thousand days of life. Statistics is a wily science, and figures can be read in different ways.

Everyone was in his place when food was handed out, distributed to ten prisoners at a time. There were so many people that no sooner had breakfast been distributed than it was time for lunch. As soon as lunch had been served, it was time for supper. Only bread and 'tea' (warm boiled water)

and half a herring were distributed to each man in the morning. No more bread was issued for the rest of the day. Lunch consisted of soup, and only kasha was served for supper. Nevertheless, there was not sufficient time to serve even this quantity.

The assignment man showed Andreev his place and pointed to the second bunk. A grumble of protest came from the top bunk, but the assignment man cursed back at the grumblers. Andreev gripped the edge of the shelf with both hands and unsuccessfully attempted to bring up his right leg. The assignment man's strong arm tossed him upward, and Andreev plunked down among the naked bodies. No one paid him any attention. The 'registration' and settlement procedure had been carried out.

Andreev slept. He awoke only when food was distributed, after which he would carefully and precisely lick his hands and fall asleep again. His sleep was not sound, however, since the lice refused to leave him in peace.

No one questioned him, even though there were many people here from the taiga, and the rest were destined to end up there. They all knew this, and for that very reason they wanted to know as little as possible about their inevitable fate. They were right, Andreev reasoned. They should not know everything that he had seen. Nothing could be avoided or foreseen. What use were extra fears? These were living people, and Andreev was a representative of the dead. His knowledge, a dead man's knowledge, was of no use to them, the living.

Bathhouse time came two days later. Bathing and clothing disinfection were nothing but an annoyance, and all the prisoners prepared themselves reluctantly. Andreev, however, wanted to rid himself of lice. He had all the time in the world, and he examined the seams of his faded military shirt several times a day. But only the disinfection chamber held the promise of final victory. He went to the bathhouse willingly and, although they issued him no underwear and he had to pull his reddish military shirt over his naked body, he no longer felt the usual bites.

At the bathhouse, the usual portion of water was issued – one basin of hot water and one of cold – but Andreev managed to deceive the water man and get an extra basin. A tiny piece of soap was issued, but it was possible to gather discarded fragments from the floor and work up a good lather. This was his best bath in a year. So what if blood and pus seeped from the scurvy ulcers on his shins? So what if people in the bathhouse recoiled from him in

horror? So what if they walked around him and his lousy clothing in disgust?

When clothing was returned from the disinfection chamber, the fur socks of Andreev's neighbor Ognyov had shrunk so much that they looked like toys. Ognyov burst into tears, for the socks were his salvation in the north. Andreev, however, stared at him without sympathy. He had seen too many men cry for too many reasons. Some pretended, others were mentally disturbed, and still others had lost hope and were desperately bitter. Some cried from the cold. Andreev had never seen anyone cry from hunger.

When they returned through the silent city, the aluminum-hued puddles had cooled, and the fresh air had a smell of spring. After the session in the bathhouse, Andreev slept soundly. Ognyov, who had forgotten the incident in the bathhouse, said Andreev had 'gotten his fill of sleep'.

No one was permitted to leave, but there was one job in the section for which a man could be allowed to cross through the 'wire'. True, this had nothing to do with leaving the camp settlement and crossing the outer wire – a series of three fences, each with ten strands of barbed wire and a forbidden area beyond them circumscribed by another low fence. No one even dreamt of that. They could only contemplate the possibility of leaving the immediate yard. Beyond the barbed wire of the yard was a cafeteria, a kitchen, storehouses, a hospital – in a word, a very different life, one forbidden to Andreev. Only one person could pass through the fence – the sewage disposal man. And when he suddenly died (life is full of fortunate coincidences!), Ognyov accomplished miracles of energy and intuition. For two days he ate no bread. Then he traded the bread for a pressed-fiber suitcase.

'I got it from Baron Mandel, Andreev!'

Baron Mandel! A descendant of Pushkin! Far below, Andreev could make out the long, narrow-shouldered figure of the Baron with his tiny bald skull, but he had never had an opportunity to make his acquaintance.

Since he had been in quarantine for only a few months, Ognyov still had a wool jacket left over from the 'outside'. He presented the assignment man with the jacket and the suitcase and in exchange received the sewage disposal job. Two weeks later, Ognyov was nearly strangled to death in the dark by criminals. They took three thousand rubles from him. The ability to leave and enter quarantine evidently provided a number of business opportunities.

Andreev scarcely saw Ognyov during the heyday of his commercial career. Beaten and tormented, Ognyov made a confession to Andreev one night as he returned to his old place:

‘They cleaned me out today, but I’ll beat them in the end. They think they know cards, but I’ll get it all back!’

Ognyov never helped Andreev with bread or money, nor was this the custom in such instances. In terms of camp ethics, he was acting quite normally.

One day Andreev realized with amazement that he had survived. It was extremely difficult to get up from his bunk, but he was able to do it. The main thing was that he didn’t have to work and could simply lie prone. Even a pound of bread, three spoons of kasha and a bowl of watery soup were enough to resurrect a person so long as he didn’t have to work.

It was at this precise moment that he realized he felt no fear and placed no value on his life. He also knew that he had passed through a great test and had survived. He knew he would be able to use his terrible experience in the mine for his own benefit. The opportunity for a convict to exercise choice, free will, did, in fact, exist – however minutely. Such an opportunity was a reality that could save his life, given the right circumstances. Andreev was prepared for the great battle when he would fight a beast with the cunning of a beast. He had been deceived, and he would deceive. He would not die. He would not permit that to happen.

He would fulfill the desires and commands his body had imparted to him at the gold-mine. He had lost the battle at the mine, but it would not be the last he fought. He was the slag rejected from the mine. He had been deceived by his family, deceived by his country. Everything – love, energy, ability – had been crushed and trampled. Any justification the mind might seek was false, a lie, and Andreev knew this. Only the instinct of a beast, roused by the mine, could and did suggest a way out.

Precisely here, on these Cyclopian shelves, Andreev realized that he was worth something, that he could respect himself. He was still alive, and he had neither betrayed nor sold out anyone during the investigation or in the camp. He had succeeded in speaking the truth for the most part, and in suppressing his own fear. It was not that he feared nothing. No, but moral barriers had now been more clearly and precisely defined; everything, in fact, had become clear and precise. It was clear, for example, that Andreev was guilty of nothing. His former health was lost without a trace, broken for

ever. But was it for ever? When Andreev had been first brought to this town, he thought he might live for another two or three weeks. To regain his former strength he would have needed complete rest for many months in resort conditions, with milk and chocolate. Since it was clear, however, that Andreev would never see any such resort, he would have to die. But that was not terrible; many of his comrades had died. Something stronger than death would not permit him to die. Love? Bitterness? No, a person lives by virtue of the same reasons as a tree, a stone, a dog. It was this that Andreev had grasped, had sensed with every fiber of his being precisely here at the city transit prison camp during the typhoid quarantine.

*

The scratch marks on Andreev's hands and arms healed faster than did his other wounds. Little by little, the turtle-shell armor into which his skin had been transformed disappeared. The bright, rosy tips of his frostbitten fingers began to darken; the microscopically thin skin, which had covered them after the frostbite blisters ruptured, thickened slightly. And, above all, he could bend the fingers of his left hand. In a year and a half at the mines, both of Andreev's hands had molded themselves around the handles of a pick and shovel. He never expected to be able to straighten out his hands again. When he ate, he would grasp his spoon by pinching the handle with the tips of his fingers, and he even forgot that a spoon could be held in any other manner. His living hand was like a hook, an artificial limb. It fulfilled only the functions of an artificial hand. He could, if he wished, use it to cross himself when praying to God. But in his heart there was nothing but bitterness, and his spiritual wounds could not so easily be healed. They were never to heal.

At last, to his amazement, Andreev managed to straighten out his left hand one day in the bathhouse. Soon would come the turn of the right hand – still bent claw-fashion. At night Andreev would quietly touch his right hand, and it seemed to him that it was on the verge of opening. He bit his fingernails in the neatest fashion and then proceeded to chew his dirty, thick, slightly moistened skin – a section at a time. This hygienic operation was one of Andreev's few amusements when he was not eating or sleeping.

The bloody cracks on the soles of his feet no longer hurt as much as they used to. The scurvy ulcers on his legs had not yet healed and required bandaging, but his wounds grew fewer and fewer in number, and were replaced by blue-black spots that looked like the brand of some slave-owner. Only his big toes would not heal; the frostbite had reached the bone marrow, and pus slowly seeped from them. Of course, there was less pus than there had been back at the mine, where the rubber galoshes that served as summer footwear were so full of pus and blood that his feet sloshed at every step – as if through a puddle.

Many years would pass before Andreev's toes would heal. And for many years after healing, whenever it was cold or even slightly chilly at night, they would remind him of the northern mine. But Andreev thought of the future. He had learned at the mine not to plan his life further than a day in advance. He strove toward close goals, like any man who is only a short distance from death. Now he desired one thing alone – that the typhoid quarantine might last for ever. This, however, could not be, and the day arrived when the quarantine was up.

That morning all the residents of the section were driven out into the yard. The prisoners milled around silently, shivering for hours behind the wire fence. The assignment man stood on a barrel and shouted out the names in a hoarse, desperate voice. Those whose names were called left through the gate – never to return. Out on the highway trucks roared – roared so loudly that it was difficult to hear the assignment man.

'Don't let them call me, don't let them call me,' Andreev implored the fates in a childish invocation. No, he would not be lucky. If they didn't call for him today, they would call for him tomorrow. He would return to hunger, beatings, and death in the gold-mines. His frostbitten fingers and toes began to ache, as did his ears and cheeks. Andreev shifted his weight more and more frequently from one foot to the other. He raised his shoulders and breathed into his clasped hands, but it was no easy thing to warm his numb hands and sick feet. It was all of no use. He was helpless in the struggle with the monstrous machine whose teeth were grinding up his entire body.

'Voronov! Voronov!' the assignment man called out. 'Voronov! The bastard has to be here…' In a rage the assignment man threw the thin yellow folder on to a barrel and put his foot down on the papers.

Suddenly Andreev understood. As lightning shows the way in a storm, so his road to salvation was revealed. In his excitement he immediately grew bold and moved forward toward the assignment man, who was calling out one name after the other. People disappeared from the yard, one after the other. But the crowd was still enormous. Now, now…

‘Andreev!’ the assignment man shouted.

Andreev remained silent and examined the assignment man’s shaven jowls. When he had finished his examination, Andreev’s gaze shifted to the remaining folders. There were only a few left. ‘The last truck,’ Andreev thought.

‘Sychov! Answer – first name and patronymic!’

‘Vladimir Ivanovich,’ an elderly convict answered, according to the rules, and pushed the crowd aside.

‘Crime? Sentence? Step out!’

A few more persons responded to the assignment officer’s call. They left, and the assignment man left with them. The remaining prisoners were returned to the section.

The coughing, stamping, and shouting quieted down and dissolved into the polyphonic speech of hundreds of men.

Andreev wanted to live. He had set himself two goals and was resolved to achieve them. He saw, with unusual clarity, that he had to lengthen his stay here as long as he could, if possible to the very last day. He had to control himself and not make any mistakes… Gold was death. No one in this transit prison knew that better than Andreev. No matter what the cost, he had to avoid the taiga and the gold-mines. How could he, a slave deprived of all rights, manage this?

He had come to the conclusion that the taiga had been depopulated during the quarantine; cold, hunger, exhausting workdays, and sleeplessness must have deprived the taiga of people. That meant that trucks with prisoners would be sent to the mines from quarantine. (Official telegrams read: ‘Send 200 trees.’) Only when all the mines had been filled again would they begin sending people to other places – and not to dig gold in the taiga. Andreev did not care where he was sent. Just as long as it wasn’t to mine gold.

Andreev did not say a word about this to anyone. He did not consult with Ognyov or Parfentyev, his comrade from the mines, or with any of the thousand people who lay with him on those warehouse shelves. He knew

that, if he were to tell them of his plan, any one of them would rush to tell the camp authorities – for praise, for a cigarette butt, for no reason at all… He knew what a heavy burden it was to keep a secret, but he could do it. Only if he told no one would he be free of fear. It was two, three, four times easier for him to slip alone through the teeth of this machine. The game was his alone; that was something he had learned at the mine.

Andreev ‘did not respond’ for many days. As soon as the quarantine was up, convicts were again used for work assignments, and the trick was not to be included in the large groups, since they were usually sent to do earth-moving with picks, axes, and shovels. In smaller groups of two or three persons it was easier to earn an extra piece of bread or even some sugar; Andreev had not seen sugar for more than a year and a half. His strategy was simple and accurate. All these jobs were, of course, a violation of regulations in the transit prison, but there were many people who wanted to take advantage of free labor. People assigned to earth-moving details hoped to be able to beg for some tobacco or bread. And they succeeded – even from passers-by. Andreev would go to the vegetable storage areas, where he could .eat his fill of beets and carrots and bring ‘home’ a few raw potatoes, which he would cook in the ashes of the stove and eat half-raw. Conditions demanded that all nutritional ‘functions’ be performed quickly; there were too many hungry people around.

Andreev’s days were filled with activity and began to acquire a certain meaning. He had to stand in the cold every morning for two hours, listening to the scheduling officer call out names. And when the daily sacrifice had been made to Moloch, everyone would tramp back into the barracks, from where they would be taken to work.

Andreev worked at the bakery, carried garbage at the women’s transit prison, and washed floors in the guards’ quarters, where he would gather up the sticky, delicious meat leftovers from the officers’ tables. When work was over, mountains of bread and large basins of starchy fruit pudding would be brought to the kitchen, and everyone would sit down, eat, and stuff their pockets with bread.

Most of all Andreev preferred to be sent alone, but that happened rarely. His small-group strategy failed him only once. One day the assignment man, who remembered Andreev’s face (but knew him as Muravyov), said to him:

‘I found you a job you’ll never forget – chopping wood for the camp director. There’ll be two of you.’

Joyously the two men ran ahead of the guard, who was wearing a cavalry overcoat. The guard slipped, stumbled, jumped over puddles, holding the tails of his coat with both hands. They soon reached a small house with a locked gate and barbed wire strung along the top of the fence. The camp director’s orderly opened the gate, took them without a word to the woodshed, closed the door, and loosed an enormous German shepherd into the yard. The dog kept them locked up until they had cut and split all the wood in the shed. Later that evening they were taken back to camp. They were to be sent back to do the same job the next day, but Andreev hid under his bunk and did no work at all that day.

The next morning, before bread was distributed, a simple idea occurred to Andreev, and he immediately acted upon it. He took off his boots and put them on the edge of the shelf, soles outward, so that it looked as though he himself was lying on the bunk with his boots on. Then he lay down next to them, propping his head on his forearms.

The man distributing bread quickly counted off ten persons and gave Andreev an extra portion of bread. Nevertheless, this method was not reliable, and Andreev again began to seek work outside the barracks.

Did he think of his family? No. Of freedom? No. Did he recite poetry from memory? No. Did he recall the past? No. He lived in a distracted bitterness, and nothing more.

It was then that Andreev came upon Captain Schneider.

The professional criminals had occupied a place close to the stove. Their bunks were spread with dirty quilts and pillows of various sizes. A quilt is the inevitable companion of any successful thief, the only object that he carries with him from prison to prison. If a thief does not own a quilt, he will steal one or take it away from another prisoner. As for the pillow, it is not only a rest for his head, but it can be quickly converted into a table for endless card battles. Such a table can be given any form. But it is still a pillow. Card-players will lose their pants before they will part with their pillows.

The more prominent criminals, that is, those who were the most prominent at that moment, were sitting on the quilts and pillows. Higher up, on the third shelf, where it was dark, lay other pillows and quilts. It was

there that the criminals maintained the young effeminate thieves and their various other companions. Almost all the thieves were homosexuals.

The hardened criminals were surrounded by a crowd of vassals and lackeys, for the criminals considered it fashionable to be interested in ‘novels’ narrated orally by prisoners of literary inclination. And even in these conditions there were court barbers with bottles of perfume and a throng of sycophants eager to perform any service in exchange for a piece of bread or a bowl of soup.

‘Shut up! Senechka is talking. Be quiet! Senechka wants to sleep…’

It had been a familiar scene back at the mine.

Suddenly, among the crowd of beggars and the retinue of criminals, Andreev saw a familiar face and recognized the man’s voice. There was no doubt about it – it was Captain Schneider, Andreev’s cellmate in Butyr Prison.

Captain Schneider was a German communist who had been active in the Comintern, spoke beautiful Russian, was an expert on Goethe and an educated Marxist theoretician. Andreev’s memory had preserved conversations with Schneider, intense conversations that took place during the long prison nights. A naturally cheerful person, this former sea captain kept the entire cell in good spirits.

Andreev could not believe his eyes.

‘Schneider!’

‘What do you want?’ the captain turned around. His dull blue eyes showed no recognition of Andreev.

‘Schneider!’

‘So what do you want? You’ll wake up Senechka.’

But already the edge of the blanket had been lifted, and the light revealed a pale, unhealthy face.

‘Ah, captain,’ came Senechka’s tenor voice with a languid tone. ‘I can’t fall asleep without you…’

‘Right away, I’m coming,’ Schneider said hurriedly.

He climbed up on the shelf, folded back the edge of the blanket, sat down, and put his hand under the blanket to scratch Senechka’s heels.

Andreev walked slowly to his place. He had no desire to go on living. Even though this was a trivial event by comparison with that which he had seen and was still destined to witness, he never forgot Captain Schneider.

The number of people kept decreasing. The transit prison was being emptied. Andreev came face to face with the assignment man.

‘What’s your name?’

Andreev, however, had prepared himself for such an occurrence.

‘Gurov,’ he replied meekly.

‘Wait!’

The assignment man leafed through the onion-sheet lists.

‘No, it’s not here.’

‘Can I go?’

‘Go ahead, you animal!’ the scheduling officer roared.

Once he was assigned to wash dishes and clean up the cafeteria for people who had served their sentences and who were about to be released. His partner was one of those goners who were so emaciated they were known as ‘wicks’. The man had just been released from prison, and it was difficult to determine his age. It was the first time this goner had worked. He kept asking what they should do, would they be fed, was it all right to ask for something to eat before they began work.

The man said he was a professor of neuropathology, and Andreev recognized his name.

Andreev knew from experience that camp cooks (and not only camp cooks) did not like these ‘Ivan Ivanoviches’, as the intellectuals were contemptuously nicknamed. He advised the professor not to ask for anything in advance and gloomily thought that he himself would have to do most of the work, since the professor was too weak. This was only just, and there was no reason to be offended; Andreev himself had been a bad, weak ‘partner’ any number of times, and no one had ever said a word to him. Where were they all now? Where were Scheinin, Riutin, Khvostov? They had all died, and he alone, Andreev, had been resurrected. Of course, his resurrection was yet to come, but he would return to life.

Andreev’s suspicions were confirmed: the professor was a weak, albeit fussy partner.

When the work was finished, the cook sat them down and placed an enormous tub of thick fish soup and a large plate of kasha before them. The professor threw up his hands in delight, but Andreev had seen men at the mines eat twenty meals, each consisting of three dishes and bread. He cast a suspicious glance at the proffered refreshments.

‘No bread?’ Andreev asked gloomily.

‘Of course there’s bread – a little.’ And the cook took two pieces of bread from a cupboard.

They quickly polished off the food. On such ‘visits’ the prudent Andreev always saved his bread in his pocket. The professor, on the contrary, gulped the soup, broke off pieces of bread, and chewed it while large drops of dirty sweat formed on his shaven gray head.

‘Here’s a ruble for each of you,’ the cook said. ‘I don’t have any more bread today.’

This was magnificent payment. There was a commissary at the transit prison, where the civilians could buy bread. Andreev told the professor about this.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ the professor said. ‘But I saw that they also sold sweet *kvas* there. Or was it lemonade? I really want some lemonade, anything sweet.’

‘It’s up to you, professor, but if I were you, I’d buy bread.’

‘Yes, I know, you’re right,’ the professor repeated, ‘but I really want some sweet lemonade. Why don’t you get some too?’

Andreev rejected that suggestion out of hand.

Ultimately Andreev managed to get himself assigned to washing floors alone at the bookkeeping office. Every evening he would meet the orderly, whose duties included keeping the office clean. These were two tiny rooms crowded with desks, each of which occupied more than four square yards. The work took only about ten minutes, and at first Andreev could not understand why the orderly ‘hired’ someone to do the job. The orderly had to carry water through the entire camp himself, and clean rags were always prepared in advance when Andreev came. The payment was generous – cheap tobacco, soup, kasha, bread, and sugar. The orderly even promised to give Andreev a light jacket, but Andreev’s stay came to an end before he managed to do that.

Evidently the orderly viewed washing floors as shameful so long as he could hire some ‘hard worker’ to do it for him – even if it required only five minutes a day. Andreev had observed this characteristic in Russian people at the mines. If the head of the camp gave an orderly a handful of tobacco to clean the barracks, the orderly would dump half the tobacco into his pouch, and with the other half would hire a ‘political’ to do the job for him. The latter, in turn, would again divide up the tobacco and hire someone from his

barracks for two hand-rolled cigarettes. This man, who had just finished a twelve- or fourteen-hour shift, would wash the floor at night for these two cigarettes and consider himself lucky; he could trade the cigarettes for bread.

Currency questions represent the most complex area of camp economy. Standards of measurement are amazing. Tea, tobacco, and bread are the exchangeable, ‘hard’ currencies.

On occasion the orderly would pay Andreev with coupons redeemable in the kitchen. These were rubber-stamped pieces of cardboard that worked rather like tokens – ten dinners, five main courses, and so on. When the orderly gave Andreev a token worth twenty portions of kasha, the twenty portions did not cover the bottom of a tin basin.

Andreev watched the professional criminals shove bright yellow thirty-ruble notes through the window, folded to look like tokens. This tactic always produced results. A large bowl filled to the brim with kasha would inevitably emerge from the window in response to such a token.

There were fewer and fewer people left in the transit prison. Finally the day arrived when the last truck was dispatched from the yard, and only two or three dozen men remained in camp.

This time they were not dismissed to the barracks but were grouped in military formation and led through the entire camp.

‘Whatever they intend to do, they can’t be taking us to be shot,’ an enormous one-eyed man next to Andreev said.

This was precisely what Andreev had been thinking: they couldn’t be taking them to be shot. All the remaining prisoners were brought to the assignment man in the bookkeeping office.

‘We’re going to take your fingerprints,’ the assignment man said as he came out on to the porch.

‘Well, if it’s come to that, you can have me without raising a finger,’ the one-eyed man said cheerfully. ‘My name is Filipovsky.’

‘How about you?’

‘Pavel Andreev.’

The assignment man found their files.

‘We’ve been looking for you for a long time,’ he said without a trace of anger.

Andreev knew that he had won his battle for life. It was simply impossible for the taiga not to have sated its hunger for people. Even if they were to be shipped off, it would be to some nearby, local site. It might even be in the town itself. That would be even better. Andreev had been classified only for ‘light physical labor’, but he knew how abruptly such a classification could be changed. It was not his classification that would save him, but the fact that the taiga’s orders had already been filled. Only local sites, where life was easier, simpler, less hungry, were still waiting for their final deliveries. There were no gold-mines in the area, and that meant there was hope for survival. This Andreev had learned during the two years he had spent at the mines and these three months in quarantine, spent under animal-like tension. Too much had been accomplished for his hopes not to be realized.

He had to wait only one night for an answer.

After breakfast, the assignment man rushed into the barracks with a list – a small list, Andreev immediately noted with satisfaction. Lists for the mines inevitably contained twenty-five men assigned to a truck, and there were always several of such sheets – not just one.

Andreev and Filipovsky were on the same list. There were other people as well – only a few, but more than just two or three.

Those whose names were on the list were taken to the familiar door of the bookkeeping department. There were three other men standing there: a gray-haired, sedate old man of imposing appearance wearing a good sheepskin coat and felt boots; a fidgety, dirty man dressed in a quilted jacket and quilted pants with footcloths instead of socks protruding from the edges of his rubber galoshes; the third was wearing a fur jacket and a fur hat.

‘That’s the lot of them,’ the assignment man said. ‘Will they do?’

The man in the fur jacket crooked his finger at the old man.

‘Who are you?’

‘Yury Izgibin. Convicted under Article Fifty-Eight of the criminal code. Sentence: twenty-five years,’ the old man reported vigorously.

‘No, no,’ the fur jacket frowned. ‘What’s your trade? I can learn your case history without your help…’

‘Stove-builder, sir.’

‘Anything else?’

‘I’m a tinsmith as well.’

‘Very good.’

‘How about you?’ the officer shifted his gaze to Filipovsky.

The one-eyed giant said that he had been a stoker on a steamboat based in Kamenets-Podolsk.

‘And how about you?’

The dignified old man unexpectedly muttered a few words in German.

‘What’s that all about?’ the fur jacket asked with an air of curiosity.

‘That’s our carpenter. His name is Frisorger, and he does good work. He sort of lost his bearings, but he’ll be all right.’

‘Why does he speak German?’

‘He’s from the German Autonomous Republic of Saratov.’

‘Ah… And how about you?’ This last question was directed at Andreev.

‘He needs tradesmen and working people in general,’ Andreev thought. ‘I’ll be a leather-dresser.’

‘Tanner, sir.’

‘Good. How old are you?’

‘Thirty-one.’

The officer shook his head. But since he was an experienced man and had seen people rise from the dead, he said nothing and shifted his gaze to the fifth man, who turned out to be a member of the Esperantist Society.

‘You see, I’m an agronomist. I even lectured on agronomy. But I was arrested as an Esperantist.’

‘What’s that – spying?’ the fur coat asked indifferently.

‘Something like that,’ the fidgety man responded.

‘What do you say?’ the assignment man asked.

‘I’ll take them,’ the officer said. ‘You can’t find better ones anyway. They’ve all been picked over.’

All five were taken to a separate room in the barracks. But there were still two or three names left in the list. Andreev was sure of that. The scheduling officer arrived.

‘Where are we going?’

‘To a local site, where do you think?’ the assignment man said. ‘Here’s your boss.’

‘We’ll send you off in an hour. You’ve had three months to “fatten up”, friends. It’s time to get on the road.’

They were all summoned in an hour – not to a truck, but to the storeroom. ‘They probably want to change clothes,’ Andreev thought.

‘April is here, and it’ll soon be spring.’ They would issue summer clothing, and he would be able to turn in his hated winter mine clothing – just cast it aside and forget it. Instead of summer clothing, however, they were issued winter clothing. Could this be an error? No, ‘winter clothing’ was marked in red pencil oh the list.

Not understanding anything, they donned quilted vests, pea jackets, and old, patched felt boots. Jumping over the puddles, they returned to the barracks room, from which they had come to the storehouse.

Everyone was extremely nervous and silent. Only Frisorger kept muttering something in German.

‘He’s praying, damn him…’ Filipovsky whispered to Andreev.

‘Does anyone understand what’s happening?’ Andreev asked.

The gray-haired stove-builder who looked like a professor was enumerating all the ‘near sites’: the port, a mine four kilometers from Magadan, one seventeen kilometers from Magadan, another twenty-three kilometers from the city, and still another forty-seven kilometers away… Then he started on road construction sites – places that were only slightly better than gold-mines.

The assignment man came running.

‘Come on out! March to the gate.’

Everyone left the building and went to the gates of the transit prison. Beyond the gates stood a large truck, the bed of which was covered with a green tarpaulin.

‘Guards, assume command and take your prisoners.’

The guard did a head count. Andreev felt his legs and back grow cold…

‘Get in the truck!’

The guard threw back the edge of the large tarpaulin; the truck was filled with people dressed in winter clothing.

‘Get in!’

All five climbed in together. All were silent. The guard got in the cab, the motor roared up, and the truck moved down the road leading to the main highway.

‘They’re taking us to the mine four kilometers from Magadan,’ the stove-builder said.

Posts marking kilometers floated past. All five put their heads together near a crack in the canvas. They could not believe their eyes…

‘Seventeen…’

‘Twenty-three…’ Filipovsky said.

‘A local mine, the bastards!’ the stove-builder hissed in a rage.

For a long time the truck wound down the twisted highway between the crags. The mountains resembled barge haulers with bent backs.

‘Forty-seven,’ the fidgety Esperantist squealed in despair.

The truck rushed on.

‘Where are we going?’ Andreev asked, gripping someone’s shoulder.

‘We’ll spend the night at Atka, 208 kilometers from Magadan.’

‘And after that?’

‘I don’t know… Give me a smoke.’

Puffing heavily, the truck climbed a pass in the Yablonovy Range.

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# *The Left Bank*

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# *The Procurator of Judea*

On the fifth of December 1947, the steamship *Kim* entered the port of Nagaevo with a human cargo. Winter was coming on and navigation would soon be impossible, so this was the last ship that year. Magadan met its guests with forty-below weather. These, however, were no guests but convicts, the true masters of this land.

The whole city administration had come down to the port. Every truck in town was there to meet the boat. Soldiers – conscripts and regulars – surrounded the pier, and the process of unloading began.

Responding to the summons of the telegraph, every truck not needed in the mines within a radius of 500 kilometers had arrived empty in Magadan.

The dead were tossed on to the shore to be hauled away to the cemetery and buried in mass graves without so much as identification tags. A directive was made up ordering that the bodies be exhumed at some later date.

Patients who were moderately ill were taken to the central Prison Hospital on the left bank of the Kolyma River. The hospital had just been moved there – 500 kilometers away. If the *Kim* had arrived a year earlier, no one would have had to make the long trip to the new hospital.

The head of surgery, Kubantsev, had just been transferred from an army post. He had been in the front lines, but even so he was shaken by the sight of these people, by their terrible wounds. Every truck arriving from Magadan carried the corpses of people who had died on the way to the hospital. The surgeon understood that these were the transportable, ‘minor’ cases, and that the more seriously ill had been left in the port.

The surgeon kept repeating the words of General Radischev, which he had read somewhere just after the war: ‘Experience on the front cannot prepare a man for the sight of death in the camps.’

Kubantsev was losing his composure. He didn’t know what sort of orders to give, where to begin. But something had to be done. The orderlies were removing patients from the trucks and carrying them on stretchers to the surgical ward. Stretchers with patients were crammed into the corridors. Smells cling to memory as if they were poems or human faces. That festering camp stench remained for ever in Kubantsev’s memory. He would never forget that smell. One might think that the smell of pus and death is the same everywhere. That’s not true. Ever since that day it always seemed to Kubantsev that he could smell his first Kolyma patients. Kubantsev smoked constantly, feeling he was losing control of himself, that he didn’t know what instructions to give to the orderlies, the paramedics, the doctors.

‘Aleksei Alekseevich.’ Kubantsev heard someone say his name. It was Braude, the surgeon who had formerly been in charge of this ward but who had been removed from his position by the higher-ups simply because he was an ex-convict and had a German name to boot.

‘Let me take over. I’m familiar with all this. I’ve been here for ten years.’

Upset, Kubantsev relinquished his position of authority, and the work began. Three surgeons began their operations simultaneously. The orderlies scrubbed down to assist. Other orderlies gave injections and poured out medicine for the patients.

‘Amputations, only amputations,’ Braude muttered. He loved surgery and even admitted to suffering when a day in his life went by without an operation, without a single incision.

‘We won’t be bored this time,’ Braude thought happily. ‘Kubantsev isn’t a bad sort, but he was overwhelmed by all of this. A surgeon from the front! They’ve got all their instructions, plans, orders, but this is life itself. Kolyma!’

In spite of all this, Braude was not a vicious person. Demoted for no reason, he did not hate his successor or try to trip him up. On the contrary, Braude could see Kubantsev’s confusion and sense his deep gratitude. After all, the man had a family, a wife, a boy in school. The officers all got special rations, lofty positions, hardship pay. As for Braude, he had only a ten-year sentence behind him and a very dubious future. Braude was from Saratov, a former student of the famous Krause, and had shown much promise at one time. But the year 1937 shattered Braude’s life. Why should he attempt to take revenge on Kubantsev for his own failures…?

And Braude commanded, cut, swore. Braude lived, forgetting himself, and even though he hated this forgetfulness in moments of contemplation, he couldn’t change.

He had decided today to leave the hospital, to go to the mainland. The fairy tale seemed to be over, but we don’t know even the beginning.

On the fifth of December 1947, the steamship *Kim* entered the port of Nagaevo with a human cargo – three thousand convicts. During the trip the convicts had mutinied, and the ship authorities had decided to hose down all the holds. This was done when the temperature was forty degrees below zero. Kubantsev had come to Kolyma to speed up his pension, and on the first day of his Kolyma service he learned what third-and fourth-degree frostbite were.

All this had to be forgotten, and Kubantsev, being a disciplined man with a strong will, did precisely that. He forced himself to forget.

Seventeen years later, Kubantsev remembered the names of each of the convict orderlies, he remembered all the camp romances and which of the convicts ‘lived’ with whom. He remembered the rank of every heartless administrator. There was only one thing that Kubantsev didn’t remember – the steamship *Kim* with its three thousand prisoners.

Anatole France has a story, ‘The Procurator of Judea’. In it, after seventeen years, Pontius Pilate cannot remember Christ.

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# *The Lepers*

Immediately after the war a drama was played out at the hospital. Or, to be more precise, it was the conclusion of a drama.

The war had dragged out into the light of day whole strata of life that always and everywhere remain at the bottom. The actors were not criminals or underground political groups.

In the course of military actions the leprosaria had been destroyed, and the patients had merged with the rest of the population. Was this a secret war or an open one? Was it chemical or bacteriological?

People ill with leprosy easily passed themselves off as wounded or maimed in war. Lepers mixed with those fleeing to the east and returned to a real, albeit terrible life where they were accepted as victims or even heroes of the war.

These individuals lived and worked. The war had to end in order for the doctors to remember about them and for the terrible card catalogues of the leprosaria to fill up again.

Lepers lived among ordinary people, sharing the retreat and the advance, the joy and the bitterness of victory. They worked in factories and on farms. They got jobs and even became supervisors. But they never became soldiers – the stubs of the fingers that appeared to have been damaged in the war prevented them from assuming this last occupation. Lepers passed themselves off as war invalids and were lost in the throng.

Sergei Fedorenko was a warehouse manager. A war invalid, he was sufficiently able to command the disobedient stumps of his fingers to do his job well. He was forging a career for himself and expected to become a member of the Party, but when he got too close to money, he began to drink and run around with women and got arrested. He arrived in Magadan on one of the Kolyma ships as a common criminal with a sentence of ten years.

Here Fedorenko switched his diagnosis. Although there were more than enough persons maimed either by war or their own hand, it was more advantageous, more fashionable, and less noticeable to dissolve in the sea of frostbite cases.

That was how I met him in the hospital – with supposedly third- to fourth-degree frostbite, a wound that wouldn't heal, one foot and the fingers on both hands reduced to stumps.

Fedorenko was undergoing treatment – without any results. But then every patient tried his utmost to resist treatment so as not to go back to the mines. After many months of trophic ulcers, Fedorenko was released from the hospital. Not wanting to leave, he became an orderly and was ultimately promoted to senior orderly in the surgical ward with three hundred beds. This was the central hospital with a thousand convict-prisoners. One floor of one wing was reserved for civilian employees.

Somehow it happened that the doctor who was normally in charge of Fedorenko's case fell ill, and Doctor Krasinsky, an old military doctor and a lover of Jules Verne (why?), was handling his patients for him. Kolyma life had not yet beaten out of him the desire to chat, gossip, and discuss cases.

In examining Fedorenko, Krasinsky experienced a feeling of surprise, but he couldn't put his finger on just what it was. He had known this feeling of anxiety from time to time ever since he was a student. No, this was not a trophic ulcer, not a stub left by an explosion or an axe. The flesh was slowly decomposing. Krasinsky's heart began to beat. He called Fedorenko over to the window, to the light, and greedily peered into his face, unable to believe what he saw. It was leprosy! A line from a medical school text ran through Krasinsky's mind – *The human face begins to resemble that of a lion* – and Fedorenko's face was a lion's mask! Feverishly Krasinsky leafed through his textbooks. He took a large needle and poked one of the numerous white spots on Fedorenko's skin several times. There was no sensation of pain!

Sweating, Krasinsky wrote a report to his superiors. The patient, Fedorenko, was isolated in a separate room, and samples of his skin were sent for biopsies to Magadan, and from there to Moscow. The response came in about two weeks. Leprosy! It was as if Krasinsky were celebrating his birthday. The hospital authorities wrote to still higher authorities about sending Fedorenko to the Kolyma leprosarium, which was situated on an island with machine-guns trained on the crossing. There was a guard, there had to be a guard.

Fedorenko did not deny that he had been in a leprosarium and that the patients, left to their own devices, had fled to freedom. Just as in ordinary life, some followed the retreating army, and others went forward to meet the Germans. Fedorenko calmly began to wait to be sent off, but the hospital was in an uproar. People were shouting and cursing Fedorenko. Everyone feared leprosy, even those who had been beaten during questioning and whose souls had been ground into dust by a thousand interrogations, whose bodies were broken and tormented by unbearable labor, who had sentences of twenty-five years' hard labor capped with five years' exile – sentences they could never serve or survive…

The same psychic phenomenon was at work that forced a man to postpone a well-planned escape simply because there would be tobacco or commissary privileges that day. There are as many strange and illogical instances as there are camps. Human shame, for example. How does one measure it, what are its limits? People whose lives are ruined, whose past and future have been trampled on, suddenly find themselves in the grip of some trivial prejudice, some nonsense that they for some reason can neither ignore nor deny. And the sudden appearance of shame is the most subtle of human emotions, to be remembered for one's entire life as something real and infinitely precious.

There was an incident in the hospital when an orderly, who was not yet an orderly and was simply helping out, was assigned to shave a newly arrived group of women. The administration was amusing itself by assigning men to shave women and women to shave men. But this man begged his superior to classify the affair as 'sanitary treatment'. He just could not accept that his life was ruined, that these amusements of the camp authorities were nothing but a dirty foam in a terrible kettle where he himself was being boiled away.

This amusing, tender human streak reveals itself suddenly.

The hospital was in a panic. After all, Fedorenko had been working there for several months. Unfortunately, the 'prodromal period' of the illness, which precedes the appearance of any external symptoms, can last for several years. Those inclined to suspect the worst were doomed to retain this fear in their souls for ever, whether they were civilian employees or convicts.

The hospital was in a panic. The doctors searched their own bodies and those of their patients for white, insensitive spots. A needle joined the

phonendoscope and small rubber hammer as standard equipment for any doctor conducting a preliminary examination.

The patient, Fedorenko, was brought before the orderlies and doctors and undressed. An overseer with a pistol stood near the patient. Doctor Krasinsky, armed with an enormous pointer, gave a lecture on leprosy, pointing his stick alternately at the leonine face of the former orderly, at the fingers that were on the verge of falling off, and at the shiny white spots on his back.

All residents, without exception, civilian and convict, were re-examined, and suddenly a white spot insensitive to pain was discovered on the back of Shura Leschinskaya, a nurse from the front lines on duty in the women's ward. Leschinskaya, who had been in the hospital for only a few months, had no lion's mask. Her conduct had been neither stricter nor looser than that of any 'nurse' recruited from among the former prisoners.

Leschinskaya was locked up in one of the rooms of the women's ward, and a sample of her skin was sent to Magadan and from there to Moscow for analysis. The answer came: leprosy!

Disinfection after leprosy is quite difficult. Regulations require that the house in which a leper has lived be burned. That was what the textbooks said. But how could one of the wings of a gigantic two-storied hospital be burned? No one could make up his mind to do that. It was something like disinfecting expensive furs. To preserve the value of their furs, the owners are willing to risk leaving the infection in them. They sprinkle some chemical symbolically on the precious furs, because steaming would destroy not only the microbes but the fur as well. The administration would have remained silent even if it had been a matter of plague or cholera.

Someone assumed responsibility for not burning the wing, and even the room in which Fedorenko was kept under lock and key was not burned. They simply soaked everything with phenol and carbolic acid and sprayed repeatedly.

Downstairs, in the basement, two tiny rooms were constructed for the patients. Fedorenko and Leschinskaya were transferred there. Guards were stationed beside the heavy padlocked doors, and the couple was left there to await an order or a detachment of guards from the leprosarium.

Fedorenko and Leschinskaya spent one day in their cells, and when the guards were changed at the end of the day, the cells were found to be empty. Panic ensued in the hospital. Every window and door in the cells was intact.

Krasinsky was the first to figure out how they had fled. They had escaped through the floor.

Fedorenko had used his enormous strength to pry the logs apart and had broken into the bread-slicing room and the operating-room of the surgical ward. They had gathered up all the grain alcohol, and the narcotics from the cupboards, and made off with their loot to an underground den.

They had selected a spot, barricaded it, and thrown blankets and mattresses on top to wall themselves off from the world, the guards, the hospital, and the leprosarium. They lived there as man and wife for several days – three days, I believe.

On the third day guards with dogs found the two lepers. I was a member of the group that searched the tall basement of the hospital. The foundation was very high at that spot. The guards removed the logs and exposed the two lepers lying naked. They didn't get up. Fedorenko's dark, mutilated hands were around Leschinskaya's gleaming body. Both were drunk.

They were covered with blankets and carried away to one of the two cells, no longer separated.

Who covered them with a blanket, who touched their terrible bodies? A special janitor was found in the civilian hospital and, with the permission of higher authorities, given a credit of seven working days for each one spent with the lepers. That is more than they give people for working in the tungsten-mines, the lead-mines, or the uranium-mines. Seven days for one. The article of the penal code under which the man was sentenced was not taken into consideration. They found a soldier, arrested at the front and sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor and five years of exile, who naïvely assumed that his heroism would shorten his sentence and bring nearer the day of his liberation.

Convict Korolkov, a wartime lieutenant, stood guard at the cell round the clock. He even slept before the door. And when the guards arrived from the Island (on which the leprosarium was located), convict Korolkov was taken with the two lepers to tend to their needs. I never heard anything more of Korolkov, or of Fedorenko, or of Leschinskaya.

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# *Descendant of a Decembrist*[*]

Many books have been written about Mixail Lunin, the first hussar and a famous Decembrist. In the destroyed chapter of *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin wrote:

Friend of Mars, Bacchus, and Venus…

He was a true knight, an intelligent, well-informed man who not only spoke up for his cause but worked actively toward it. It was indeed a great cause! In due course I will tell you everything I know about the second hussar, his descendant.

Hungry and exhausted, we leaned into a horse collar, raising blood blisters on our chests and pulling a stone-filled cart up the slanted mine floor. The collar was the same device used long ago by the ancient Egyptians. I saw it, experienced it myself. Throughout Kolyma the mine was notorious.

The cruel, snowless Kolyma winter of 1940–41 was approaching. Cold crushed the muscles and squeezed a man's temples. Iron stoves were placed in the tarpaulin tents that served as our shelter in the summer months, but the tents, a mass of holes, could not retain the free air.

Our inventive bosses were preparing people for the winter. Inside each tent a second, smaller frame was constructed that was designed to trap a layer of air about four inches thick. This frame was covered, all but the ceiling, with roofing material. The resulting double tent was slightly warmer than the single canvas one.

The very first nights spent in these tents made it clear that this arrangement meant doom, and a quick doom at that. I had to get out of there

– but how? Who would help? Five miles from us was a large camp, Arkagala, where miners worked. Our group was considered a part of that camp. I had to get transferred there, to Arkagala.

But how?

Convict tradition demands that in such instances, a prisoner first of all approach a doctor. There was a first-aid station at Kadychkan run by a former student of the Moscow Medical Institute who hadn't finished his course of study. At least, that was the rumor in our tent.

It required enormous will-power to find the strength to go to the first-aid station. I didn't have to get dressed or put on my boots, of course, since I wore them constantly from one bathhouse day to the next. But I just didn't have the strength. Why should I waste my rest period on this 'visit' to the doctor, when it might result only in mockery or even a beating. (Such things happened.) But the main consideration was the hopelessness, the slimness of the chance of success. Nevertheless, I couldn't afford to lose even the slightest chance in the search for luck – this judgement came from my body and its exhausted muscles, not from experience or intelligence.

As in beasts, the will was subordinate to instinct.

On the other side of the road from our tent was a small hut used by geologists, exploring parties, secret police, and military patrols. The geologists had left long ago, and the hut had been converted into an outpatient medical facility with a cot, a cupboard with medications, and a curtain made from an old blanket. The blanket concealed the area where the 'doctor' lived.

Right down the middle of the road was a line of people queueing up in the bitter cold to be examined.

I squeezed my way into the hut, and the heavy door, closing behind me, pushed me right in. The doctor had blue eyes, a large forehead with two bald spots, and hair. He had to have hair; hair was an existential statement. Hair in camp is a testimony to importance. Almost everyone was shaved bald, so that anyone who had hair was the object of general envy. Combed hair was a peculiar form of protest against life in the camps.

'From Moscow?' the doctor asked me.

'From Moscow.'

'Let's get acquainted.'

I gave him my name and shook his outstretched hand. It was cold and somewhat moist.

‘Lunin.’

‘That’s a proud name,’ I said with a smile.

‘I’m his great-grandson. In our family the oldest son is always called either Mixail or Sergei. We alternate. Pushkin’s Lunin was Mixail Sergeevich.’

‘I know.’ Somehow this, our first discussion, didn’t smack at all of the camps. I forgot about my request, since I didn’t want to introduce an inappropriate note into our conversation.

‘Have a smoke!’

I began to roll a cigarette with my rosy, frostbitten fingers.

‘Take more, don’t be bashful.’

‘Back at home I have a whole library of books about my great-grandfather. I’m a medical student. But I was arrested and didn’t graduate. Everyone in our family was in the military except me. I became a doctor. And I don’t regret it.’

‘So much for Mars. A friend of Aesculapius, Bacchus, and Venus.’

‘I don’t know about the Venus part, but it certainly is true about Aesculapius – except I don’t have a diploma. If I did, I’d really show them.’

‘How about Bacchus?’

‘Well, of course, I do have grain alcohol here. But all I need is one shot-glass. I get drunk easily. But you know how things are – I take care of the civilian village as well. Come back again sometime.’

On the point of leaving, I opened the door slightly with my shoulder.

‘You know,’ Lunin said, ‘Muscovites like to talk about their town – the streets, the skating-rinks, the houses, the Moscow River – more than Kievans or Leningraders do… You people like to talk about the city even more, and they remember it better…’

I dropped by several times in the evening when Lunin had finished attending to patients. I’d smoke a home-made cigarette but never got up the nerve to ask for bread.

Sergei Mixailovich, like everyone who either through luck or profession had an easy time of it in camp, didn’t think much about others and couldn’t really understand hungry people. His sector – Arkagala – was getting enough to eat, and the mine catastrophes had bypassed the town.

‘If you like, I’ll operate on you – remove that cyst from your finger.’

‘All right.’

‘Just don’t ask me to release you from work. You know yourself it’s not really convenient for me to do that.’

‘But how can I work with my finger all cut up?’

‘You’ll manage.’

I agreed, and Lunin did a good job of removing the cyst and gave it to me as a ‘keepsake’. Many years later my wife and I were to meet, and in the first minute of our meeting she squeezed my fingers, feeling in amazement for that cyst.

I realized that Sergei Mixailovich was simply very young, that he needed an educated person to talk to, that his views of the camps and his idea of fate were no different from those of any civilian supervisor, that he was even capable of admiring the camp thugs, and that the brunt of the storm of ’38 had passed over him.

I treasured every day, every hour of rest; exhausted from life in the gold-mines, my muscles demanded a respite. I treasured every piece of bread, every bowl of soup; my stomach demanded food, and my will was not strong enough to keep my eyes from wandering over the shelves in search of bread. But I forced myself to remember Moscow’s Chinatown (which has no Chinese) and the Nikitsky gates where the writer Andrei Sobol shot himself and where Stern shot at the German ambassador’s car. It is that part of Moscow’s street history which will never be written down.

‘Yes, Moscow, Moscow. Tell me, how many women have you had?’

It was senseless for a half-starved man to keep up this conversation, but the young surgeon listened only to himself and wasn’t offended by my silence.

‘Sergei Mixailovich, our fates are a crime – the greatest crime of the age.’

‘I’m not sure of that,’ Sergei Mixailovich said with an expression of displeasure. ‘It’s just the kikes muddying the water.’

I shrugged my shoulders.

Soon Sergei Mixailovich got his transfer to Arkagala, and I thought – without any sadness or feeling of injustice – that one more person had left my life for ever and that parting was, in reality, an easy thing. But matters worked out differently.

The supervisor of the sector where we worked, harnessed to an Egyptian yoke like slaves, was Pavel Ivanovich Kiselyov. A middle-aged engineer, he

was not a Party member. He beat his prisoners daily. Whenever the supervisor set foot in the sector, there were beatings, blows, and shouting.

Was it because he had no fear of being punished? Was there a blood-lust lurking in the depths of his soul? Or perhaps a desire to distinguish himself in the eyes of the senior supervisors? Power is a terrible thing.

Zelfugarov, a counterfeiter from my work gang, lay in the snow, spitting out his broken teeth.

‘All my relatives were shot for counterfeiting, but I was a minor, so I got off with only fifteen years’ hard labor. My father offered the prosecutor half a million rubles – real ones, in cash – but he wouldn’t go for it.’

There were four of us working the shift, harnessed to the horse collar and walking around the post. We stopped near Zelfugarov. There was Korneev, a Siberian peasant; Lyonya Semyonov, a thief; the engineer Vronsky; and myself. Semyonov said:

‘It’s only in camp that you learn to work with machinery. Try your hand at any kind of work – what do you care if you break a crane or a winch?’ This point of view was popular even among many of the young surgeons in Kolyma.

Vronsky and Korneev were my acquaintances. We were not friends, but we had known each other since we had been together at Black Lake – an assignment where I returned to life. Without getting up, Zelfugarov turned his bloodied face with its swollen, dirty lips to us.

‘I can’t get up, guys. He hit me under the ribs.’

‘Go tell the paramedic.’

‘I’m afraid to, that will only make things worse. He’ll tell the supervisor.’

‘Listen,’ I said. ‘There’s no end to this. We have only one way out. As soon as the coal production chief or some other bigwig comes, someone must step forward and hit Kiselyov right on the snout. People will talk about it all over Kolyma, and they’ll have to transfer Kiselyov. Whoever hits him will have his sentence lengthened. How many years will they give for Kiselyov?’

We returned to our work, leaned into the horse collar, went back to the barracks, had supper, and prepared to go to sleep. The ‘office’ sent for me.

Kiselyov was sitting in the office, staring at the floor. He was no coward and didn’t fear threats.

‘So that’s it?’ he said cheerfully. ‘All Kolyma will talk about it? I could have you put on trial – for an attempt on my life. Get out of here, you

bastard.’

The only one who could have turned me in was Vronsky, but how? We were together the entire time.

After that, life at the work site became easier for me. Kiselyov didn’t even approach our collar and came to work with a small-caliber rifle. He didn’t descend into the test pit either.

Someone entered the barracks.

‘The doctor wants to see you.’

The ‘doctor’ who replaced Lunin was a certain Kolesnikov, a tall young student who had also been arrested and thus had never finished his course of study.

When I arrived, I found Lunin sitting at the table in his overcoat.

‘Get your things ready. We’re leaving for Arkagala. Kolesnikov, make up a transfer sheet.’

Kolesnikov folded a piece of paper several times and tore off a tiny fragment that was hardly larger than a postage stamp. On it he wrote in microscopic handwriting: ‘Transferred to medical section, Arkagala.’

Lunin took the paper and ran off.

‘I’ll have Kiselyov issue a travel permit.’

He was upset when he returned.

‘He won’t let you go. He says you threatened to hit him in the face, and he absolutely refuses to agree.’

I told Lunin the story.

‘It’s your own fault,’ he said. ‘What do you care about Zelfugarov and all these… They weren’t beating you.’

‘I was beaten before.’

‘Well, I’m off. The truck is leaving. We’ll think of something.’ And Lunin got into the cab.

A few days passed, and Lunin appeared again.

‘I’m here to see Kiselyov. About you.’

He returned in a half-hour.

‘Everything’s in order. He agreed.’

‘How?’

‘I have a method for taming the heart of the rebellious.’ And Sergei Mixailovich acted out the conversation with Kiselyov:

‘What brings you back to these parts, Sergei Mixailovich? Sit down and have a smoke.’

‘Sorry, I don’t have the time, Pavel Ivanovich. These petitions accusing you of beatings have been forwarded to me. But before signing them, I decided to ask you if they were accurate.’

‘It’s a lie, Sergei Mixailovich. My enemies will say anything…’

‘That’s what I thought. I won’t sign them. What difference would it make, Pavel Ivanovich? What’s done is done, and there’s no replacing teeth that have been knocked out.’

‘That’s right, Sergei Mixailovich. Why don’t you come home with me? My wife has made some brandy. I was saving it to celebrate the New Year, but on such an occasion…’

‘I’m sorry, Pavel Ivanovich, I just can’t. But I do want to ask one favor in return. Let me take Andreev to Arkagala.’

‘That’s one thing I’ll never do. Andreev is, how should I put it…?’

‘Your personal enemy?’

‘Precisely.’

‘Well, he’s my personal friend. I thought you would be more receptive to my request. Take a look at these petitions.’

Kiselyov fell silent.

‘OK, he can go.’

‘Make up the transfer papers.’

‘Have him come for them himself.’

I stepped across the threshold of the ‘office’. Kiselyov was staring at the floor.

‘You’re going to Arkagala. Here are your transfer papers.’

Lunin had already left, but Kolesnikov was waiting for me.

‘You can leave this evening – about nine o’clock. Right now we have a case of acute appendicitis.’ He handed me a slip of paper.

I never saw either Kiselyov or Kolesnikov again. Kiselyov was soon transferred to Elgen, where he was accidentally killed a few months after arriving. A thief broke into his house at night. Hearing steps, Kiselyov grabbed the double-barreled shotgun from the wall, cocked it, and attacked the thief. The thief tried to get out the window, and Kiselyov struck him in the back with the butt of the shotgun. The gun went off, and Kiselyov took both barrels right in the stomach.

Every convict in every coal-mining area of Kolyma was delighted. The newspaper with the announcement of Kiselyov’s funeral passed from hand to hand. In the mines the wrinkled scrap of paper was held up to the battery

light. People read it, rejoiced, and shouted: ‘Hurrah! Kiselyov died! So there is a God!’

It was from this Kiselyov that Sergei Mixailovich had saved me.

Convicts from Arkagala worked the mine. For every hundred men working underground, there were a thousand working in support groups.

Hunger had reached Arkagala. And, of course, it reached the political prisoner barracks first.

Sergei Mixailovich was angry.

‘I’m not the sun that can warm everybody. I got you a job as an orderly in the chemical laboratory, so you have to figure out for yourself how to live – camp-style, you understand?’ Sergei Mixailovich patted me on the shoulder. ‘Dmitry worked here before you. He sold all the glycerine – both barrels. He got twenty rubles for a half-liter bottle. Said it was honey. Ha ha ha. These convicts will drink anything.’

‘That’s not my way.’

‘Just what is your way?’

The orderly’s job wasn’t reliable. There were strict orders regarding me, and I was quickly transferred to the mine. The desire to eat grew stronger.

Sergei Mixailovich rushed about the camp. Our doctor had one passion: he was immensely attracted by camp officials of all types. Friendship or even a shade of friendship with any camp official was a source of unbelievable pride for him. He attempted to demonstrate his intimacy with the camp authorities in any way possible and was capable of bragging for hours about this intimacy.

I went to see him in his office. Hungry but afraid to ask for a piece of bread, I sat and listened to his endless bragging.

‘As for the camp authorities, they have real power. For there is no power but of God. Ha ha ha! All you have to do is please them, and everything is fine.’

‘I’d like to punch each and every one of them in the face.’

‘That’s just your trouble. Listen, let’s make an agreement. You can come to see me; I know it’s boring in the regular barracks.’

‘Boring?’

‘Sure. You can drop by, have a smoke. No one will give you a smoke in the barracks. I know what things are like over there – you light up, and a hundred eyes are watching you. Just don’t ask me to release you from work.

I can’t do that. That is, I can, but it’s awkward. I won’t interfere in that respect. As for food, I depend on my orderly for that. I don’t stand in line myself for bread. So if you need bread, ask my orderly, Nikolai. How is it that after all your years in the camps you can’t lay your hands on some bread? You know what Olga Petrovna, the chief’s wife, told me today? They’re inviting me for dinner. There’ll be booze too.’

‘I have to go, Sergei Mixailovich.’

Hungry and terrible days ensued. Once, no longer able to struggle with hunger, I went to the first-aid station.

Sergei Mixailovich was sitting on a stool, clipping the dead nails from the frostbitten fingers of a dirty, hunched man. The nails fell with a click, one after the other, into an empty basin. Sergei Mixailovich noticed me.

‘I collected half a basin of these yesterday.’

A woman’s face looked out from behind the curtain. We rarely saw women, let alone this close and in the same room. She looked beautiful to me. I bowed and said hallo.

‘Hallo,’ she said in a low, wonderful voice. ‘Sergei, is this your friend, the one you told me about?’

‘No,’ Sergei Mixailovich said, tossing his snips into the basin and walking over to the sink to wash his hands.

‘Nikolai,’ he said to his orderly, who had just come in, ‘take this basin away and bring some bread for him.’ He nodded in my direction.

I waited until the bread was brought and left for the barracks. As for the woman, whose tender and beautiful face I remember to this day, I never saw her again. She was Edith Abramovna, civilian, Party member, a nurse from the Olchan Mine. She had fallen in love with Sergei Mixailovich, taken up with him, got him transferred to Olchan, and obtained for him an early release while the war was still going on. She traveled to Magadan to present Sergei Mixailovich’s case to Nikishov, the head of Far Northern Construction. She was expelled from the Party for being involved with a prisoner; it was the usual method for putting a stop to such affairs. She got Lunin’s case transferred to Moscow, had his sentence canceled, and even managed to get permission for him to take his medical examinations at Moscow University, from which he graduated and had all his civil rights reinstated. And she married him formally.

And when this descendant of a Decembrist received his medical degree, he abandoned Edith Abramovna and demanded a divorce.

‘She’s got a pack of relatives, like all those kikes! I don’t need that.’

He left Edith Abramovna, but he didn’t manage to leave Far Northern Construction. After graduation, he had to return to the Far North for at least three years. As a licensed doctor, Lunin used his connections with camp authorities to land an unexpectedly important appointment – chief of surgery at the Central Prison Hospital on the Left Bank of the Kolyma River in the village of Debin. It was 1948, and by that time I was senior orderly of the surgical ward.

I met Lunin on the stairway. He had a habit of blushing when he was embarrassed. His face became very red when he saw me, but he treated me to a cigarette, congratulated me on my successes and my ‘career’, and told me about Edith Abramovna.

Lunin’s appointment was like a thunderbolt. Rubantsev had been in charge of surgery. A front-line surgeon and a major in the medical service, he was an experienced, no-nonsense type who had moved here after the war – and not just for three days. Some didn’t like Rubantsev. He didn’t get along with the camp authorities, couldn’t stand toadying and lying, and had terrible relations with Scherbakov, chief of sanitation in Kolyma.

Rubantsev had signed a contract and had been warned that the prisoners were his enemies. Being a man of independent mind, however, he soon saw that he had been lied to during his ‘political’ preparation. Rogues, embezzlers, slanderers, and loafers were his colleagues at the hospital. It was the prisoners with their many skills (including medicine) who ran the hospital. Rubantsev realized where the truth lay, and he was not about to hide it. He applied to be transferred to Magadan, where there was a high school for his son. He was denied the transfer orally. After considerable effort, he managed to send his son to a boarding-school fifty miles from Debin. This took several months, and by that time he was running his ward confidently and dismissing loafers and thieves. News of these threatening activities was immediately sent to Scherbakov’s office in Magadan.

Scherbakov didn’t like to stand on ceremony with his subordinates. Cursing, threats, and prison sentences worked fine with prisoners, but they wouldn’t do for a former frontline surgeon who had received medals in the war and who was working under contract.

Scherbakov dug up Rubantsev’s old application and had him transferred to Magadan. And although the academic year had already begun and the surgical ward was working smoothly, he had to abandon everything…

Rubantsev left, and three days later a drunken party was held in the treatment room. Even the principal doctor, Kovalyov, and the hospital director, Vinokurov, helped themselves to the surgical alcohol. They hadn't visited the surgical ward earlier, because they were afraid of Rubantsev. Drunken parties began in all the doctors' offices, and nurses and cleaning women were invited. In a word, there were a lot of changes. Secondary adhesion began to occur in operations in the surgical ward, since precious grain alcohol could not be wasted on patients. Half-drunk hospital officials strolled back and forth through the ward.

This was my hospital. After I finished my courses in 1946, I was sent here with a group of patients. The hospital grew before my eyes. It had been a regimental headquarters formerly, but after the war a specialist on camouflage had judged it unsuitable because of its prominent location. Indeed, it could be seen for tens of miles, and so it was converted into a prison hospital. On leaving the three-story building, the former owners, the Kolyma Regiment, had ripped out all the plumbing and sewer pipes. All the chairs in the auditorium had been burned in the boiler. The walls were full of holes, and the doors were broken. The Kolyma Regiment had left Russian-style. We had to repair everything – screw by screw, brick by brick.

The doctors and assistants were doing their best to do a good job. For many of them it was a sacred duty – to pay for their medical education by helping people.

All the loafers raised their heads when Rubantsev left.

'Why are you stealing alcohol from the medicine cabinets?'

'Go to hell,' a nurse answered me. 'Thank God that Rubantsev is gone, and Lunin is in charge now.'

I was amazed and depressed at Lunin's conduct. The party continued.

At the next brief meeting, Lunin laughed at Rubantsev: 'He didn't do a single ulcer operation. And he's supposed to be a surgeon.'

This was nothing new. It was true that Rubantsev hadn't done any ulcer operations. The patients in the therapeutic wards who had this diagnosis were emaciated, undernourished prisoners who didn't have the slightest chance of surviving the operation. 'The background isn't right,' Rubantsev would say.

'He's a coward,' Lunin shouted and transferred twelve such patients to his ward from the therapeutic ward. All twelve were operated on, and all

twelve died. The hospital doctors remembered Rubantsev's experience and kindness.

'Sergei Mixailovich, this is no way to work.'

'Don't tell me what to do!'

I made up a report asking that a commission be sent from Magadan. I was transferred to a tree-cutting group in the forest. They wanted to send me to a penal mine, but the senior official of the local Party chapter talked them out of it: 'This isn't '38 anymore. It's not worth the risk.'

A commission was sent, and Lunin was 'fired' by Far Northern Construction. Instead of three years, he only had to serve one and a half.

A year later, when the hospital administration had been replaced, I returned from my paramedic job in the forest to take charge of admitting patients to the hospital.

Once, in Moscow, I met the descendant of a Decembrist. We didn't say hallo.

Sixteen years later I learned that Edith Abramovna had gotten Lunin reinstated in his job at Far Northern Construction. She had gone with him to the Chukotka Peninsula, to the village of Pevek. Here they talked things out for the last time, and Edith Abramovna died; she drowned herself in the Pevek River.

Sometimes my tranquilizers don't work, and I wake up at night. I remember the past and a woman's beautiful face; I hear her deep voice: 'Sergei, is this your friend?'

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# *Committees for the Poor*

The pages of Russian history written in ’37 and ’38 contain lyrical as well as tragic lines, and the handwriting of those lines is rather unusual. Butyr Prison is an enormous edifice whose numerous basements, towers and wings are filled to overflowing with prisoners under investigation. It is a devil’s dance of arrests, shipments of prisoners who know neither what they are accused of nor the length of their sentences, of cells packed with prisoners who have not yet perished. In this complicated life a curious tradition has grown up, a tradition that has survived for decades.

The disease of ‘vigilance’, whose seeds were widely sown, had grown into a spy mania and laid hold of the entire country. In the investigators’ offices a sinister, secret meaning was attached to every trifling remark, every slip of the tongue.

The prison authorities’ contribution consisted of forbidding prisoners under investigation to receive any clothing or food packages. Sages of jurisprudence maintained that two French rolls, five apples and a pair of old pants were enough to transmit any text into the prison – even a fragment of *Anna Karenina*.

Such ‘messages from the free world’ – an invention of the inflamed minds of diligent bureaucrats – were effectively prevented. A regulation was issued that only money could be sent, and it had to be in round figures of ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty rubles; thus, numbers could not be used to work out a new ‘alphabet’ of messages.

It would have been simpler and more reliable to forbid anything at all to be sent into the prisons, but this measure was reserved for the investigators. They could, ‘in the interest of the investigation’, forbid anything to be sent to a particular prisoner. There was also a commercial side to the question:

Butyr Prison's commissary or 'shop' increased its sales many times over after clothing and food packages were forbidden.

For some reason, the administration could not make up its mind to reject all assistance from relatives and acquaintances, even though they were certain that such an action would cause no protest either within the prison or without.

Russians do not like to bear witness in court about infringements of the ephemeral rights of prisoners under investigation. The witness in a Russian trial is, by tradition, only barely distinguishable from the defendant, and his 'involvement' in the matter may serve as a black mark against him in the future. The situation of prisoners under investigation is still worse. They will all eventually serve sentences, for 'Caesar's wife is perfect,' and the Ministry of Internal Affairs does not make mistakes. No one is arrested without due cause, and sentencing is an inevitable sequel to arrest. Whether the prisoner under investigation receives a heavy or a light sentence depends partly on 'luck' and partly on a tangled web of factors which include the bedbugs that tormented the investigator on the night before the trial and the voting in the American Congress.

In essence, there is only one way out of those prisons where preliminary investigations are conducted – via the 'black raven', the prison bus that takes convicted prisoners to the train station. At the station, prisoners are loaded into freight cars that have been adapted to carry people. From there the innumerable prison cars begin their slow journey, *en route* to the thousands of 'labor' camps.

This doom-laden atmosphere puts its stamp on the conduct of prisoners under investigation. Cheerfulness and bravado are replaced by gloomy pessimism and a weakening of morale. At the interrogations the prisoner struggles with a ghost, a ghost possessing the strength of a giant. The prisoner is accustomed to dealing with reality, but now he must battle with a shadow. But this shadow is a 'fire that burns, a spear that draws blood'. Everything is terrifyingly real, except the 'case' itself. His nerves strained to the breaking-point, the prisoner is crushed in his struggle with fantastic phantoms of incredible stature, and he loses the will to resist. He signs everything the investigator has invented and from that moment himself becomes a figure in the unreal world with which he earlier struggled. He is transformed into a pawn in a terrible, dark, bloody game played out in the investigators' offices.

‘Where did they take him?’

‘To Lefortovo Prison. To sign.’

Prisoners under investigation know they are doomed. The camps always had more than their share of prisoners under investigation; sentencing in no way exempted the prisoner from all the other articles of the criminal code. They remained ‘in effect’, just as they had outside the prison walls – except that here all the accusations, punishments, and interrogations were still more brazen, still more fantastic in their crudeness.

When clothing and food packages were forbidden in the capital, the ‘outlying districts’ – the camps – introduced a special ration for prisoners under investigation: a mug of water and 300 grams of bread (two-thirds of a pound). These were punishment-cell conditions, and they quickly edged prisoners under investigation closer to their graves. This ‘investigatory ration’ was used to obtain the ‘best evidence of all’ – the accused’s personal confession.

In 1957, Butyr Prison permitted prisoners to receive up to fifty old-style rubles (about five dollars) a month. Anyone with money credited to his account could use it to buy food at the prison ‘shop’. ‘Shop days’ were held once a week, and up to thirteen rubles could be spent on each occasion. If the prisoner possessed more money on his person when he was arrested, it was credited to his account, but he could not spend more than fifty rubles a month. Of course, receipts were issued instead of cash, and the amount remaining was noted by the shop assistant on the back of these receipts in red ink.

Contact with prison authorities and comradely discipline had been maintained from time immemorial by a system of cell leaders elected by the prisoners themselves. Before each ‘shop day’ the prison administration would issue the cell leader a slate tablet and a piece of chalk. The cell leader used the tablet to list all purchases which the inmates of the cell wished to make. Usually the front of the tablet listed all the separate items and the quantity desired by each individual. The total quantities ordered were indicated on the reverse side.

This activity usually took a whole day, since prison life is filled to overflowing with all sorts of events, and in the eyes of the prisoners the scale by which these events are evaluated is one of high seriousness. On the following morning the cell leader would take one or two inmates with him and go to the commissary to collect the purchases. The remainder of the day

would pass in sorting out the different food items, weighing and dividing them according to ‘individual orders’.

The prison store boasted a large selection of food: butter, sausage, cheeses, white rolls, cigarettes, cheap tobacco…

Once established, the prison rations never changed. If a prisoner forgot the day of the week, he could recognize it by the smell of the lunch-time soup or the taste of the only dish served for supper. Pea soup was always served for lunch on Mondays, and supper was wheat kasha. On Tuesdays it was millet soup for lunch and pearl-barley kasha for supper. In six months each prison dish was served exactly twenty-five times. The food of Butyr Prison was famed for its variety.

Anyone who had money could spend at least thirteen rubles four times a month to supplement the watery prison soup and pearl barley (referred to as ‘shrapnel’) with something more tasty, more nutritious, more useful.

Prisoners who didn’t have money could not, of course, make any purchases at all. There were always people in the cell – and not just one or two – who did not have a single kopeck. There might be someone from another city who had been arrested on the street and whose arrest was classified as ‘top secret’. His wife would rush from one prison to another, from one police station to another in a vain attempt to learn her husband’s address. She would take a package from one prison to another; if they accepted it, that meant her husband was alive. If they did not accept it, anxious nights awaited her.

Or the man arrested without money might be the head of a family. Immediately after the arrest they would force his wife, children, and relatives to denounce him. By tormenting him with constant interrogations from the moment of arrest, the investigator would attempt to force a ‘confession’ of an act that the man had never committed. As an additional means of intimidation, aside from threats and beatings, the prisoner might be denied money.

Relatives and acquaintances were justifiably afraid to go to the prison with packages. Anyone who insisted on having his package accepted or on a search for the missing person would raise suspicion. Undesirable consequences at work or even arrest could result. Such things happened.

There was yet another type of convict without money. Lyonka was in cell 68. He was seventeen years old and came from the Tumsk region of the Moscow Oblast – in the thirties a very rural area. Lyonka was chubby, had a

white face and unhealthy skin that had not known fresh air for a long time. Lyonka felt great in prison. He was fed there as he had never been fed in his entire life. Almost everyone treated him to something from the prison store. Instead of home-grown tobacco, he learned to smoke *papirosy* – cigarettes attached to a short cardboard mouthpiece. He was delighted by everything – at how interesting it was here and how nice the people were! This illiterate teenager from the Tumsk Region had discovered an entire world. He considered his case to be some sort of game, a kind of craziness, and he couldn't have cared less about it. His only worry was how to extend for ever his investigation and his life in this prison where there was so much food and everything was so clean and warm.

His case was an amazing one. It was an exact repetition of a Chekhov story titled 'Evil-Doers'. Lyonka had been unscrewing nuts from railroad ties, had been caught on the spot, and was arrested as a spy under Point 7 of Article 58. Lyonka had never heard of Chekhov's story but tried to prove to the investigator, just as Chekhov's protagonist had done, that he didn't unscrew two nuts in a row, that he 'understood…'

The investigator was using the Tumsk lad's testimony to build a case involving some unusual 'concepts', the most innocent of which carried the death penalty. But the investigator hadn't managed to link Lyonka with anyone else, and Lyonka was now spending a second year waiting for the investigator to establish such a link.

Persons who had no money in their personal account at the prison were supposed to be limited to the official ration without any supplementary nourishment. Prison rations are far from stimulating. Even a small amount of variety in the food brightens the prisoner's life and somehow raises his spirits.

In all probability the proteins, fats, and carbohydrates of the prison ration (as opposed to the ration in camp) were arrived at on the basis of certain theoretical calculations and experimental data. These calculations were probably derived from some 'scientific' studies; scientists like to be involved in that sort of work. It is just as probable that in the Moscow Investigatory Prison the quality of food preparation guarantees the living consumer a sufficient number of calories. It is also quite likely that the official sampling of the food by a doctor is not a complete mockery or a formality as it is in the camps. Some old prison doctor might even ask the cook for a second helping of lentils, the dish highest in calories, before

searching out the line in the official form where he is to place his signature to approve the menu. The doctor might even joke that the prisoners have no reason to complain about the food – on the grounds that he himself had just finished a bowl with relish. But then, the doctors are given plates of *today's* lentils.

No one ever complained about the food in Butyr Prison. It wasn't that it was particularly good, but that the prisoners had other things to worry about. The most disliked prison dish was boiled beans. Somehow it was prepared in such a singularly unappetizing fashion that it was termed 'a dish to choke on'. Nevertheless, no one complained even about the beans.

Sausage, butter, sugar, cheese, and fresh rolls from the commissary were sheer delight. Everyone enjoyed eating them with tea – not the raspberry-flavored boiling water issued by the prison, but real tea steeped in a mug and poured from an enormous bucket-sized teapot of red copper, a teapot left over from czarist days, a teapot from which Russian revolutionaries of the nineteenth century might have drunk.

Naturally, 'shop day' was a joyous event in the life of the cell. Denial of 'shop privileges' was a severe punishment that always led to quarrels; prisoners feel such deprivations very keenly. Any accidental noise heard by the guard in the corridor or a disagreement with the commandant on duty was looked on as an act of insubordination, the punishment for which was denial of shop privileges. The dreams of eighty persons quartered in twenty different places went up in smoke. It was a severe punishment.

One might think that those prisoners who had no money would be indifferent to the withdrawal of shop privileges, but that was not the case.

Once the food was brought in, evening tea would commence. Everyone bought whatever it was he wanted. Those who had no money felt out of place at the general holiday. They were the only ones not to experience the nervous energy characteristic of 'shop day'.

Of course, everyone would treat them. A prisoner could drink a mug of tea with someone else's sugar and eat a white roll; he could smoke someone else's cigarette – even two – but he didn't feel comfortable, and it was not the same as if he had bought it with his own money. The prisoner who had no money was so sensitive that he was afraid to eat an extra piece.

The adroit collective brain of the prison found a way out, a way of ending the discomfiture of those who had no money, a way of protecting their self-respect and providing even the most impoverished prisoners with the

official right to make use of the commissary. They could spend their own money independently and buy whatever they chose.

Where did this money come from?

A famous phrase from the days of military communism, from the first years of the revolution, was reborn: ‘Committees for the Poor’. Some unknown person mentioned it in one of the prison cells, and the phrase caught on in an uncanny fashion and migrated from cell to cell – by tapping on the walls, by notes hidden under a bench in the bathhouse, and, easiest of all, by transfers from one prison to another.

Butyr Prison is famed for its smooth functioning. The twelve thousand convicts in this enormous prison are in constant round-the-clock movement; every day, regularly scheduled buses take prisoners to Lubyanka Prison, bring prisoners from Lubyanka Prison for interrogation, for meetings with witnesses, for trial. Other buses transfer prisoners to other prisons…

In instances of cell-rule violations, the internal prison administration transfers prisoners under investigation to the Police Tower, Pugachov’s Tower, North Tower, or South Tower, all of which have special ‘punishment’ cells. There is even a wing with cells so small that one cannot lie down but must sleep sitting up.

One-fifth of the population of the cells is moved every day – either to ‘photography’, where profile and full-face pictures are taken and a number is attached to a curtain next to which the prisoner sits, or to ‘piano lessons’ – that is, fingerprinting (a process that for some reason was never considered offensive). Or they might be taken along the endless corridors of the gigantic prison to the interrogation wing. As they walk down the corridor, the guard taps the key against his own brass belt buckle to warn of the approach of a ‘secret prisoner’. And until the guard hears hands clap in response, he will not let the prisoner proceed. (At the Lubyanka Prison the snapping of fingers is used instead of the jingling of keys. As in Butyr, the response is a hand clap.)

Movement is perpetual, and the entrance gates never close for long. Nevertheless, there has never been an instance when co-defendants ended up in the same cell.

If a prisoner’s trip is canceled and he has crossed the threshold of the prison even for a second, he cannot return without having all his things disinfected. That’s the way things are done; it is known as the Sanitation Code. The clothes of those who are frequently taken to Lubyanka Prison for

interrogation are quickly reduced to rags. Even without these special trips, clothing wears out much more quickly in prison than in civilian life. Prisoners sleep in their clothes, tossing on the boards that cover the berths. This and the frequent and energetic steam treatments intended to kill lice quickly destroy the clothing of every prisoner brought in for investigation.

No matter how strict the control, however, the words of the author of *The Charterhouse of Parma* ring true: ‘The jailor thinks less of his keys than the prisoner does of escape.’

‘Committees for the Poor’ came into being spontaneously, as a comradely form of mutual aid. Someone happened to remember the original Committees for the Poor. Who can say, perhaps the author who injected new meaning into the old term had himself once participated in real committees for the poor in the Russian countryside just after the revolution?

These committees were set up in a very simple way so that any prisoner could give aid to his fellows. When sending his order to the ‘shop’, each prisoner donated ten percent to the committee. The total sum received in this fashion was divided among all those in the cell who were ‘moneyless’. Each of them had the right independently to order food from the ‘shop’.

In a cell with seventy or eighty persons, there were always seven or eight who had no money. More often than not, money eventually arrived, and the ‘debtor’ attempted to pay back his cellmates, but he was not obliged to. In turn, he simply deducted his own ten percent whenever he could.

Each ‘beneficiary’ received ten or twelve rubles per ‘shop day’ and was able to spend a sum roughly equal to what the others spent. No thanks were expressed for such help, since the custom was so rigidly observed that it was considered the prisoner’s inalienable right.

For a long time, perhaps even for years, the prison administration had no inkling of this ‘organization’. Or perhaps they ignored the information of loyal cell informers and secret agents. It is hard to believe the authorities were not aware of these committees. Probably the administration of Butyr Prison had no desire to repeat its sad experience in unsuccessfully attempting to put an end to the notorious game of ‘matches’.

All games are forbidden in prison. Chess pieces molded from bread chewed up by the ‘entire cell’ were confiscated and destroyed as soon as they were noticed by the watchful eye of the guard peering through the peephole in the door. The very expression, ‘watchful eye’, acquired in

prison a literal rather than figurative meaning: the attentive eye of the guard framed by the peep-hole.

Dominoes and checkers were strictly forbidden in the investigatory prison. Books were not forbidden, and the prison library was a rich one, but the prisoner under investigation derived no benefit from reading other than that of taking his mind off his own important and tormenting thoughts. It is impossible to concentrate on a book in a common cell. Books serve as amusement and distraction, taking the place of dominoes and checkers.

Cards are customary in cells that contain criminals, but there are no cards in Butyr Prison. Indeed, there are no games there other than ‘matches’.

Matches is a game for two. There are fifty matches to a box. Thirty are left in the lid, which is placed on end. The lid is then shaken and raised, and the matches fall out on to the floor.

Players use one match as a lever to pick from the pile any matches that can be removed without disturbing the remainder. When one player commits an error, the other takes his turn.

Matches is the well-known child’s game of pick-up sticks, adapted by the agile prison mind for the prison cell.

The entire prison played matches from breakfast to dinner, and from dinner to supper. People became very wrapped up in the game. Match champions appeared, and there were matches of a special quality – those that had grown shiny from constant use. Such matches were never used to light a cigarette.

This game soothed the prisoners’ nerves and introduced a certain calm into their troubled souls.

The administration was powerless to destroy or forbid this game. After all, matches were permitted. They were issued (individually) and were sold in the commissary.

Wing commandants tried destroying the boxes, but the game could go on without them.

The administration reaped only shame in this struggle against pick-up sticks; none of its efforts made any difference. The entire prison continued to play matches.

For this same reason – out of fear of being shamed – the administration ignored the Committees for the Poor. They were loath to become involved in this far from glorious struggle.

But rumors of the committees spread to higher and higher levels and ultimately reached a certain Institution which issued a stern order to liquidate the committees. Their very name seemed to indicate a challenge, an appeal to the conscience of the revolution.

How many cells were checked and admonished! How many criminal slips of paper with encoded calculations of orders and expenditures were seized in the cells during sudden searches! How many cell leaders spent time in the punishment cells of the Police Tower or Pugachov's Tower! It was all in vain; the committees continued to exist in spite of all the warnings and sanctions.

It was indeed extremely difficult to control the situation. The wing commandant and the overseer who worked for years in the prison had, moreover, a somewhat different view of the prisoner than did their high-placed superiors. On occasion they might even take the prisoner's side against the superior. It wasn't that they abetted the prisoner, but when it was possible they simply ignored violations and did not go out of their way to find fault. This was particularly the case if the guard was not a young man. From the point of view of the prisoner, the best superior is an older man of low rank. A combination of these two conditions more or less guarantees an almost decent person. It's even better if he drinks. Such a person is not trying to build a career. The career of a prison guard – and especially of a camp guard – must be lubricated with the blood of the prisoners.

But the Institution demanded that the committees be eliminated, and the prison administration vainly attempted to achieve that result.

An attempt was made to blow up the committees from within. This was, of course, the most clever of solutions. The committees were illegal organizations, and any prisoner could refuse to make contributions that were forced on him. Anyone not desiring to pay these taxes and support the committees could protest, and his refusal would be supported wholeheartedly by the prison administration. It would have been ludicrous to think otherwise, for the prisoners' organization was not a state that could levy taxes. That meant that the committees were extortion, a racket, robbery…

Of course, any prisoner could refuse to make contributions simply by claiming he didn't want to, and that would have been that. It was his money, and no one had any right to make any claims, etc., etc. Once such a

statement was made, nothing would be deducted and everything ordered would be delivered.

But who would risk making such a statement? Who would risk placing himself in opposition to the entire group, to people who are with you twenty-four hours a day, where only sleep can save you from the hostile glare of your fellow inmates? In prison everyone involuntarily turns to his neighbor for spiritual support, and it is unthinkable to subject oneself to ostracism. Even though no attempts are made to exert any physical influence, rejection by one's fellows is more terrible than the threats of the investigator.

Prison ostracism is a weapon in the war of nerves. And God help the man who has had to endure the demonstrated contempt of his fellow inmates.

But if some antisocial citizen is too thick-skinned and stubborn, the cell leader has another, still more humiliating and effective weapon at his disposal.

No one can deprive a prisoner of his ration (except the investigator, when this is necessary for the 'case'), and the stubborn one will receive his bowl of soup, his portion of kasha, his bread. Food is distributed by a person appointed by the cell leader; this is one of his prerogatives.

Bunks line the walls of the cell and are separated into two rows by the passageway leading from the door to the window. The cell has four corners, and food is served from each of them in turn. One day it is served from one corner, and the next day from another. This alternation is necessary to avoid upsetting the already hypernervous prisoners with some trifle, such as which part of the thin prison soup they will receive, and to guarantee that each has an equal chance of getting thicker soup, at the right temperature… Nothing is trivial in prison.

The cell leader declares that the soup can be served and adds: 'And serve the one who doesn't care about the committees last.'

This humiliating, unbearable insult can be repeated four times a Butyr day, since there is tea for morning and evening, soup for dinner, and kasha for supper.

A fifth opportunity presents itself when bread is distributed.

It is risky to appeal to the wing commandant in such matters, since the entire cell will testify against the stubborn one. Everyone lies – to a man – and the commandant will never learn the truth.

But the selfish person is no weakling. Moreover, he believes that he alone has been unjustly arrested and that all his cellmates are criminals. His skin is thick enough, and he doesn't lack stubbornness. He easily bears the brunt of his cellmates' ostracism; those eggheads and their trick will never make him cave in. He might have been swayed by the ancient device of physical threat of violence, but there are no physical crimes in Butyr Prison. Thus, the selfish one is about to celebrate his victory – the sanction has proved futile.

The inmates of the cell and their leader, however, have at their disposal one more weapon. The cells are checked each evening when the guard is changed. The new guard is required to ask if they wish to make any 'statements'.

The cell leader steps forward and demands that the ostracized man be transferred to a different cell. It is not necessary to explain the request; it simply has to be stated. No later than the next day, and perhaps even earlier, the transfer is sure to be carried out, since the public statement relieves the cell leader of any responsibility for discipline in the cell.

If he were not transferred, the recalcitrant man might be beaten or killed, and such events involve repeated explanations by the guard to the commandant and to still higher prison officials.

If an investigation of a prison murder is conducted, the fact that the guard was warned is discovered immediately. Thus, it is judged best to accede to the demand and not resist making the transfer.

To be transferred to another cell, not brought in from the 'free world', is not a very pleasant experience. This always puts one's new cellmates on their guard and causes them to suspect that the transferred person is an informer. 'I hope he's been transferred to our cell only for refusing to participate in the committee,' is the first thought of the cell leader. 'What if it's something worse?' The cell leader will attempt to learn the reason for the transfer – perhaps through a note left in the bottom of the waste-basket in the toilet or by tapping on the wall, using the system worked out by the Decembrist, Bestuzhev, or by Morse Code.

The newcomer will receive no sympathy or confidence from his new comrades until an answer is received. Many days pass, the reason for the transfer is clarified, passions have quieted down, but the new cell has its own committee and its own deductions.

Everything begins again – if it begins at all, since the newcomer has learned a bitter lesson in his former cell. His resistance is crushed.

There were no Committees for the Poor in Butyr Prison until clothing and food packages were forbidden and commissary privileges became practically unlimited.

The committees came into being in the second half of the thirties as a curious expression of the ‘personal life’ of prisoners under investigation, a way for those who had been deprived of all rights to make a statement as to their own continuing humanity. Unlike the ‘free’ world ‘outside’ or the camps, society in prison is always united. In the committees this society found a way to make a positive statement as to the right of every man to live his own life. Such spiritual forces run contrary to all prison regulations and investigatory rules, but they always win out in the end.

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# *Magic*

A stick tapped on the window, and Golubev recognized it. It was the riding-crop of the section chief.

‘I’m coming,’ Golubev shouted through the window as he pulled on his pants and buttoned the collar of his shirt. At that very moment the chief’s messenger, Mishka, appeared on the threshold of the room and in a loud voice pronounced the usual formula with which Golubev’s work day began:

‘The chief wants you!’

‘In his office?’

‘In the guardhouse.’

But Golubev was already walking out the door. It was easy working with this boss. He wasn’t cruel to the prisoners and, although he inevitably translated any delicate matters into his own crude language, he was intelligent and knew what was what.

True, at that time it was fashionable to show that you had been ‘reforged’ by the new world, and the chief simply wanted to stick to a safe channel in an unfamiliar stream. Perhaps. Perhaps. Golubev didn’t give it any thought at the time.

Golubev knew that his boss – his name was Stukov – had been in a lot of hot water with the higher-ups in camp, that a number of accusations had been leveled at him, but he didn’t know either the essence or the details of those investigations that had been abandoned.

Stukov liked Golubev for not accepting bribes and for his aversion to drunks – for some reason Stukov hated drunks… Probably he also liked Golubev for his boldness.

A middle-aged man, Stukov lived alone. He loved all sorts of news about technology and science, and stories of Brooklyn Bridge made him ecstatic.

But Golubev couldn’t talk about anything even resembling Brooklyn Bridge.

Stukov, however, could learn about that sort of thing from Miller, Pavel Miller – an engineer, convicted of counter-revolutionary activity. Miller was Stukov’s favorite.

Golubev caught up with Stukov at the guardhouse.

‘All you ever do is sleep.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Did you know they brought in a new group of prisoners from Moscow? They came through Perm. I tell you, you were asleep. Get your crew and let’s go pick out the ones we need.’

The section stood on the very edge of the non-convict world, at the end of a railroad spur. From there human shipments were sent on through the taiga on foot, and Stukov had the right to select the men who were to be left behind.

Stukov had magical insight, tricks from the area of applied psychology, tricks that he had learned as a supervisor who had grown old working in the labor camps. Stukov needed an audience, and Golubev was probably the only one who could appreciate his extraordinary talent. For a long time this ability seemed supernatural to Golubev – until the moment when he realized he also possessed the magic power.

The camp office permitted them to retain fifty carpenters in the section. The men were lined up in front of the chief, not in a single row, but three and four deep.

Stukov walked slowly down the line, slapping his riding stick against his unpolished boots. From time to time his hand would rise.

‘Come forward… you. And you. No, not you. You, over there…’

‘How many have we got?’

‘Forty-two.’

‘OK, here’s eight more.’

‘You… you… you.’

While the names of the men were copied down, their personal files were also separated out. All fifty were well acquainted with axe and saw.

‘Thirty mechanics!’

Stukov walked down the line, slightly frowning.

‘Come forward… you… you… You, get back. What were you arrested for, theft?’

‘Yes, citizen chief, for theft.’

Thirty mechanics were selected without a single mistake.

Ten clerks were needed.

‘Can you pick them out by appearance?’

‘No.’

‘Let’s go, then.’

‘You, come forward… you… you…’

Six men came forward.

‘That’s all the bookkeepers there are in this group.’

They checked the files, and they were right; that’s all there were. They selected clerks from other groups that arrived later.

This was Stukov’s favorite game, and it amazed Golubev. Stukov was himself as delighted as a child by his magical power and was unhappy whenever he lost his sense of confidence. He didn’t make mistakes, but simply lost confidence and then he would stop the selection process.

Each time Golubev watched with pleasure this game that had nothing to do with cruelty or malicious joy at another’s misfortune.

Golubev was amazed at this knowledge of people and the unbreakable tie between body and soul.

He had witnessed these demonstrations of his boss’s magic power many times. There was no special trick to it – just years of experience in working with convicts. Convict clothes smooth out differences, but that simply lightens the task: to read the profession of a man in his face and hands.

‘Who are we going to pick out today, sir?’

‘Twenty carpenters. I also got a telegram from headquarters to pick out those who used to work in the secret police,’ Stukov smirked, ‘and who were convicted for non-political crimes. That means they’ll go back to their desks. What do you think of that?’

‘I don’t think anything. Orders are orders.’

‘Did you figure out how I picked out the carpenters?’

‘Well…’

‘I just picked out the peasants. Every peasant is a carpenter. I get good laborers from among the peasants. And I don’t make mistakes. But how can I pick out a member of the secret police? I don’t know. Maybe they have shifty eyes? What do you think?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Neither do I. Maybe I’ll learn by the time I’m old and ready to collect my pension.’

The group was mustered, as always, along the row of railroad cars. Stukov made his usual speech about work and the system of work credits, stretched out his hand, and walked twice along the railroad cars.

‘I need carpenters. Twenty of them. But I’ll pick them myself. Don’t move.’

‘You, come forward… you… you… That’s all of them. Get out their files.’

The chief’s hand felt for a slip of paper in his jacket pocket.

‘Stay where you are. There’s one other matter.’

Stukov held up the slip of paper.

‘Have any of you worked in the secret police?’

Two thousand convicts remained silent.

‘I ask you, did any of you work in the secret police?’

From the rear rows, pushing his neighbors aside with his fingers, a thin man made his way to the front. He really did have shifty eyes.

‘I worked as an informer, citizen chief.’

‘Get the hell away from me!’ Stukov said with contempt and delight.

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# *A Piece of Meat*

Yes, Golubev offered this bloody sacrifice. A piece of meat was cut from his body and cast at the feet of the almighty god of the camps. To placate the god. To placate him or to deceive him? Life repeats Shakespearian themes more often than we think. Did Lady Macbeth, Richard III, and King Claudius exist only in the Middle Ages? Shylock wanted to cut a pound of flesh from the body of the merchant of Venice. Is that a fairy tale? Of course, the appendix is but a worm-like spur of the cecum, a rudimentary organ that weighs less than a pound. And, of course, conditions of absolute sterility were observed in offering the bloody sacrifice… The rudimentary organ turned out to be not rudimentary at all, but essential, functional, life-saving.

The end of the year fills with anxiety the lives of those prisoners who feel insecure about their positions (and who of the convicts feels secure?). The victims of this sense of insecurity were primarily those convicted under Article 58 of the Criminal Code – political prisoners. After years of hungry, cold work in the mines they had won the ephemeral uncertain happiness of a few months, a few weeks of work in their chosen profession or any service position – bookkeeper, orderly, doctor, laboratory assistant. They managed to get a position intended for civilians (there were no civilians) or common criminals (common criminals didn't prize these 'privileged jobs' since they could always find that type of work, and therefore they frequently got drunk and worse).

Staff positions were filled by persons sentenced under Article 58 of the Criminal Code, and they did their work well. And without hope. For as soon as a commission arrived, they would be removed from their jobs and the head of the camp would be reprimanded. The head of the camp in his

turn never wanted to spoil his relations with the senior commission, and removed in advance all those with no right to such privileged jobs.

A good camp head would wait for the commission to arrive, let the commission do its work, remove anyone who had to be removed, and leave. It was not a time-consuming process and anyone not removed would remain, remain for a long time – for a year, till the next December. For a half-year at least. A less capable camp head, a more foolish one, would remove such persons in advance so as to be able to report that everything was in order. The worst camp heads, those who had the least experience, would conscientiously carry out the orders of their superiors and not permit persons condemned under Article 58 to work with any instrument other than the pick and wheelbarrow, the saw and the axe. Such camp heads were the least successful. Such camp heads were quickly fired.

Commission raids always occurred toward the end of the year. The higher-ups had their own shortcomings in the control of their operations, and they tried to make up for them toward the end of the year. And they would send commissions. Sometimes they would even come themselves. They would get travel expenses, and the positions under their control would receive individual attention. All they had to do was make a ‘check’ indicating that orders were being carried out. It was just a matter of shuffling from one foot to the other, riding around and on occasion showing their temper, their strength, their magnitude.

From the most insignificant officials to the most important with stars on their shoulders, all maintained this pattern, and both camp inmates and camp heads knew it. It wasn’t a new game, and the ritual was a familiar one. Nevertheless it was nerve-racking, dangerous, and irreversible.

This December arrival could break the backs and lead to the grave many who were considered lucky only yesterday.

Such raids boded no good for anyone in camp. The convicts, particularly those convicted under Article 58, expected no good. They expected only the worst.

The rumors and fears, those same rumors and fears that always come true, had begun yesterday. Word was out that some higher-ups had arrived with a whole truck-load of soldiers and a bus, a ‘black raven’, to haul away prisoners, like booty, to hard-labor camps. Local superiors began to bustle about, and those who had been great became small next to these masters of life and death – these unknown captains, majors, and lieutenant-colonels.

The lieutenant-colonel was lurking somewhere in the office depths while the captains and majors scurried about the yard with various lists. Golubev's name was bound to be on those lists. Golubev felt this, knew it. But nothing had been announced yet, no one had been 'written off.

About half a year ago the 'black raven' had arrived for its usual raid, its manhunt. Golubev, whose name wasn't on the lists, was standing near the entrance with a convict surgeon. The surgeon worked not only as a surgeon, but also as a general practitioner.

The latest group of trapped, snared, unmasked convicts was being shoved into the bus, and the surgeon was saying goodbye to his friend who was to be taken away.

Golubev stood next to the surgeon and watched the bus crawl away in a cloud of dust to disappear in a mountain ravine. The surgeon looked into Golubev's eyes and said of his friend who had just departed to his death: 'It's his own fault. All he needed was an attack of acute appendicitis and he could have stayed.'

Those words stuck in Golubev's mind – perhaps not so much the thought, or the logic, as the visual recollection: the firm eyes of the surgeon, the bus cloaked in a cloud of dust…

'The duty officer's looking for you.' Someone ran up to Golubev to give him the message, and at that moment Golubev caught sight of the duty officer.

'Get your things!'

The duty officer held a list in his hands. It was a short list.

'Right away,' said Golubev.

'Meet me at the entrance.'

But Golubev didn't go to the entrance. Clutching the right side of his belly with both hands, he groaned and hobbled off in the direction of the first-aid clinic.

The surgeon, that same surgeon, came on to the porch and for a moment something was reflected in his eyes, some distant memory. Perhaps it was the cloud of dust that enveloped the bus that took the other surgeon away for ever.

The examination was brief.

'Take him to the hospital. And get me the surgical nurse. Call the doctor from the civilian village as my assistant. It's an emergency operation.'

At the hospital, two kilometers from the camp ‘zone’, Golubev was undressed, washed, and registered.

Two orderlies led Golubev into the room and seated him in the operating-chair. He was tied to the chair with strips of cotton.

‘You’ll get a shot now,’ he heard the voice of the surgeon. ‘But you seem to be a brave sort.’

Golubev remained silent.

‘Answer me! Nurse, talk to the patient.’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘It hurts.’

‘That’s the way it always is with a local anesthetic.’ Golubev heard the voice of the surgeon explaining something to his assistant. ‘It’s just a lot of talk about it killing the pain. Look at that…’

‘Hold on for a while!’

Golubev’s entire body shuddered at the intense pain, but almost at once the pain was dulled. The surgeons started joking and kidding with each other in loud voices.

The operation was drawing to a close.

‘Well, we’ve removed your appendix. Nurse, show the patient his meat. See?’

The nurse held up to Golubev’s face a piece of intestine about half the size of a pencil.

‘The instructions demand that the patient be shown that the cut was necessary and that the growth was actually removed,’ explained the surgeon to his civilian assistant. ‘This’ll be a little bit of experience for you.’

‘I’m very grateful to you,’ said the civilian physician, ‘for the lesson.’

‘A lesson in humanity, a lesson in love for one’s fellow man,’ the surgeon said mysteriously, taking off his gloves.

‘If you have anything else like this, be sure to send for me,’ the civilian physician said.

‘If it’s something like this, I’ll be sure to,’ said the surgeon.

The orderlies, themselves patients in patched white gowns, carried Golubev into the ward. It was a small post-operative ward, but there were few operations in the hospital and just then it was occupied by non-surgical patients.

Golubev lay on his back, carefully touching the bandage that was wrapped around him somewhat in the manner of an Indian fakir or yogi. As

a child, Golubev had seen pictures of fakirs and yogis in magazines, and nearly an entire lifetime later he still didn't know if such people really existed. But the thought of fakirs and yogis slid across his brain and disappeared. The exertion of the will and the nervous upheaval were fading away, and the pleasant sense of a duty accomplished filled Golubev's entire body. Each cell of his body sang and purred something pleasant. For the time being he was free from the threat of being sent off to an unknown convict fate. This was merely a delay. How long would the wound take to heal? Seven or eight days. That meant that in two weeks the danger would again arise. Two weeks was a long time, a thousand years. It was long enough to prepare oneself for new trials. Even so, seven or eight days was the textbook period for what doctors refer to as 'first intention'. And if the wound were to become infected? If the tape covering the wound were to come loose prematurely from the skin? Gingerly Golubev touched the bandage and the hard gauze that was soaked with gum arabic and already drying. He tried to feel through the bandage. Yes… This was an extra way out, a reprieve of several days, perhaps months. If he had to.

Golubev remembered the large ward in the mine hospital where he had been a patient a year earlier. Almost all the patients there ripped off their bandages, scratched or pulled open their wounds, and sprinkled dirt into them – real dirt from the floor. Still a newcomer, Golubev was amazed, even contemptuous, at those nocturnal rebindings. A year passed, however, and the patients' mood became quite comprehensible to Golubev and even made him envious. Now he could make use of the experience acquired then.

Golubev drowsed off and awoke when someone's hand pulled the blanket from his face. (Golubev always slept camp fashion, covering his head, attempting above all to keep it warm and to protect it.) A very pretty head with a small mustache and hair cut square in back was suspended above his own. In a word, the head was not at all the head of a convict, and when Golubev opened his eyes, his first thought was that this was some sort of recollection of yogis or a dream – perhaps a nightmare, perhaps not.

'Not an honest crook, not a human being in the whole place,' the man wheezed in a disappointed fashion and covered Golubev's face again with the blanket.

But Golubev pulled down the blanket with feeble fingers and looked at the man. The man knew Golubev, and Golubev knew him. There was no mistaking it. But he mustn't rush, rush to recognize him. He had to

remember. Remember everything. And Golubev remembered. The man with the hair cut square in back was… Now the man would take off his shirt, and Golubev would see a cluster of intertwining snakes on his chest… The man turned around, and the cluster of intertwining snakes appeared before Golubev's eyes. It was Kononenko, a criminal who had been in the same transit prison with Golubev several months earlier. A murderer with multiple sentences, he played a prominent role among the camp criminals and had been 'braking' for several years in pre-trial prisons. As soon as he was about to be sent off to a forced-labor camp, he would kill someone in the transit prison. He didn't care whom he killed as long as it was not a fellow-criminal. He strangled his victims with a towel. A towel, a regulation-issue towel was his favorite murder instrument, his authorial style. They would arrest him, start up a new case, try him again, and add a new twenty-five-year term to the hundreds of years he already had to serve. After the trial Kononenko would try to be hospitalized to 'rest up', and then he would kill again. And everything would begin from the beginning. At that time, execution of common criminals had been abolished. Only 'enemies of the people' convicted under Article 58 could be shot.

'Kononenko's in the hospital now,' Golubev thought calmly, and every cell in his body sang joyously, fearing nothing and confident of success. Kononenko's in the hospital now. He's passing through his hospital 'cycle' – one of the sinister phases of his metamorphoses. Tomorrow, or perhaps the day after tomorrow, Kononenko's program would demand the usual victim. Perhaps all Golubev's efforts had been in vain – the operation, the fearful straining of the will? Now he, Golubev, would be strangled by Kononenko as his latest victim. Perhaps it was a mistake to evade being sent to a hard-labor camp where they gave you a striped uniform and affixed a six-digit number to your back like an ace of diamonds? But at least you don't get beaten there, and there aren't a lot of Kononenkos running around.

Golubev's bed was under the window. Opposite him lay Kononenko. Next to the door, his feet almost touching Kononenko's, lay a third man, and Golubev could see his face well without having to turn his body. Golubev knew this patient too. It was Podosenov, an eternal resident of the hospital.

The door opened, and the orderly came in with medicine.

'Kazakov!' he shouted.

‘Here,’ shouted Kononenko, getting up.

‘There’s a note for you.’ The orderly handed him a folded piece of paper.

‘Kazakov?’ The name pulsed through Golubev’s mind. ‘He’s Kononenko, not Kazakov.’ Suddenly Golubev comprehended the situation, and a cold sweat formed on his body.

It was much worse than he had thought. None of the three was in error. It was Kononenko under another’s name, Kazakov’s name and with Kazakov’s crimes, and he had been sent to the hospital as a ‘stand-in’. This was even worse, even more dangerous. If Kononenko was Kononenko, Golubev might or might not be his victim. In such a case there was an element of chance, of choice, the opportunity to be saved. But if Kononenko was Kazakov, then there was no chance for Golubev. If Kononenko nursed only the slightest suspicion that Golubev had recognized him, Golubev would die.

‘Have you met me before? Why do you keep staring at me like a python at a rabbit? Or maybe like a rabbit at a python? How do you educated people say it?’

Konenenko sat on the stool before Golubev’s bed, shredding the note with his fingers and scattering the fragments on Golubev’s blanket.

‘No, I never laid eyes on you before.’ Golubev’s face was colorless, and his voice hoarse.

‘It’s a good thing too,’ said Kononenko, taking a towel from the nail driven in the wall above the bed and shaking the towel before Golubev’s face. ‘I was going to strangle this “doctor” yesterday.’ He nodded in the direction of Podosenov whose face was a picture of infinite horror. ‘Look what the bastard is doing,’ Kononenko said cheerfully, pointing with the towel in the direction of Podosenov. ‘See the jar under his cot? He’s mixing his own blood with his piss… He scratches his finger and drips in a little blood. Knows what he’s doing. No worse than any doctor. And the lab analysis shows he has blood in his urine. Our “doctor” stays in the hospital. Tell me, is a man like that worthy to live in this world?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know? Yes you do. But yesterday they brought you in. We were together in the transit prison, right? Before my last trial. Then I went under the name of Kononenko.’

‘I never saw you before,’ said Golubev.

‘Yes you did. That’s when I decided. Better I do you in than the “doctor”. It’s not his fault.’ Kononenko pointed at Podosenov, whose circulation was slowly, very slowly, returning to normal. ‘It’s not his fault. He’s only saving his own skin. Just like you or me…’

Kononenko walked up and down the room, pouring the paper shreds from one palm to the other.

‘And I would have “fixed” you, sent you to the moon. And I wouldn’t have hesitated. But now the orderly brought this note… I have to get out of here quick. Our guys are getting cut up at the mine. They’re asking all the thieves in the hospital to help out. You don’t understand that kind of life… You don’t have the brains to be a crook!’

Golubev remained silent. He knew that life. But only from the outside looking in.

After dinner Kononenko checked out and departed from Golubev’s life for ever.

While the third bed was empty, Podosenov came over to Golubev’s bed, sat down on the edge at his feet, and whispered:

‘Kazakov is sure to strangle the both of us. We have to tell the head of the hospital.’

‘Go to hell,’ Golubev said.

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# *Esperanto*

A wandering actor who happened to be a prisoner reminded me of this story. It was just after a performance put on by the camp activities group in which he was the main actor, producer, and theater carpenter.

He mentioned the name Skoroseev, and I immediately recalled the road to Siberia in ’39. The five of us had endured the typhoid quarantine, the work assignments, the roll-calls in the biting frost, but we were nevertheless caught up by the camp nets and cast out into the endlessness of the taiga.

We five neither knew nor wanted to know anything about each other until our group reached the spot where we were to work and live. Each of us received the news of our future trip in his own way: one went mad, thinking he was to be shot at the very moment he was granted life. Another tried to talk his way out of the situation, and almost succeeded. I was the third – an indifferent skeleton from the gold-mine. The fourth was a jack-of-all-trades over seventy years old. The fifth was Skoroseev. ‘Skoroseev,’ he would pronounce carefully, standing on tiptoes so as to look each of us in the eye.

I couldn’t care less, but the jack-of-all-trades kept up the conversation.

‘What kind of work did you do before?’

‘I was an agronomist in the People’s Agriculture Commissariat.’

The chief of coal exploration, whose responsibility it was to receive the group, leafed though Skoroseev’s folder.

‘I can still work, citizen chief…’

‘OK, I’ll make you a watchman…’

Skoroseev performed his duties zealously. Not for a minute would he leave his post, afraid that any mistake could be exploited by a fellow prisoner and reported to the camp authorities. It was better not to take any chances.

Once there was a heavy snowstorm that lasted all night. Skoroseev's replacement was a Gallician by the name of Narynsky. This chestnut-haired convict had been a prisoner of war during World War I, and he had been convicted of plotting to re-establish Austro-Hungary. He was a little proud of having been accused of such a 'crime' among the throngs of Trotskyites and saboteurs. Narynsky told us with a chuckle that when he took over the watch he discovered that Skoroseev hadn't budged from his spot even during the snowstorm. Skoroseev's dedication was noticed, and his position became more secure.

Once a horse died in camp. It was no great loss, since horses work poorly in the far north. But the meat! The meat! The hide had to be removed from the frozen carcass. There were neither butchers nor volunteers, but Skoroseev offered to do the job. The camp chief was surprised and pleased; there would be both hide and meat! The hide could be registered in the official report, and the meat would go into the general pot. The entire barracks, all of the village spoke of Skoroseev. Meat! meat! The carcass was dragged into the bathhouse, where Skoroseev skinned and gutted it when it had thawed. The hide stiffened again in the frost and was carried off to the storehouse. We never tasted the meat; at the last minute the camp chief realized that there was no veterinarian who could sign to give permission. An official report was made up, and the carcass was hacked into pieces and burned on a bonfire in the presence of the camp chief and the work gang leader.

We were prospecting for coal, but without any luck. Little by little, in groups of five and ten, people were taken away from our camp. Making their way along the forest path up the mountain, these people left my life for ever. Each of us understood that ours was a prospecting group and not a mine group. Each strove to remain here, to 'brake', as long as possible. One would work with unusual diligence, another would pray longer than usual. Anxiety had entered our lives.

A new group of guards had arrived from behind the mountain. For us? But they took no one away, no one!

That night there was a search in the barracks. We had no books, no knives, no felt pens, no newspapers, no writing paper. What was there to search for?

They were confiscating civilian clothing. Many of the prisoners had acquired such clothing from civilians who worked in the prospecting group

which itself was unguarded. Were they trying to prevent escapes? Fulfilling an order, maybe? Or was there some change of authority higher on up?

Everything was confiscated without any reports or records. Confiscated, and that was that! Indignation was boundless. I recalled how, two years earlier, civilian clothing had been confiscated in Magadan; hundreds of thousands of fur coats from hundreds of convict gangs that had been shipped to the Far North of Misery. These were warm coats, sweaters, and suits that could have served as precious bribes to save a life in some decisive hour. But all roads back were cut off in the Magadan bathhouse. Mountains of civilian clothing rose in the yard. They were higher than the water tower, higher than the bathhouse roof. Mountains of clothing, mountains of tragedies, mountains of human fates suddenly snapped. All who left the bathhouse were doomed to death. How these people had fought to protect their goods from the camp criminal element, from the blatant piracy that raged in the barracks, the cattle cars, the transit points! All that had been saved, hidden from the thieves, was confiscated in the bathhouse by the state.

How simple it all was! Only two years had passed, and now everything was being repeated.

Civilian clothing that had reached the mines was confiscated later. I remember how I had been awakened in the middle of the night. There were searches in the barracks every day, and every day people were led away. I sat on my cot and smoked. I had no civilian clothing. It had all been left in the Magadan bathhouse. But some of my comrades had civilian clothing. These were precious things – symbols of a different life. They may have been rotting, torn, unmended, because no one had either the time or the strength to sew. Nevertheless they were treasured.

Each of us stood at his place and waited. The investigator sat next to the lamp and wrote up reports on confiscated items.

I sat on the bunk and smoked, neither upset nor indignant, but overwhelmed by one single desire – that the search be ended as quickly as possible so we could go back to sleep. But our orderly, whose name was Praga, began to hack away at his suit with an axe, tore the sheets into shreds, chopped up his shoes.

‘Just rags, all they’ll get is rags.’

‘Take that axe away from him,’ shouted the inspector.

Praga threw the axe on the floor. The search stopped. The items Praga had torn and cut were his own things. They had not yet managed to write up a report on them. When he realized they were not about to seize him, Praga shredded his civilian clothing before our very eyes. And before the eyes of the investigator.

That had been a year ago. And now it was happening again.

Everyone was excited, upset, and had difficulty falling asleep again.

‘There’s no difference between the criminals who rob us and the government that robs us,’ I said. And everyone agreed with me.

As watchman, Skoroseev started his shift about two hours before we did. Two abreast – all the taiga path would allow – we reached the office, angry and offended. Naïve longing for justice sits deep in man – perhaps even too deep to root out. After all, why be offended? Angry? Indignant? This damn search was just one instance of thousands. But at the bottom of each of our souls something stronger than freedom, stronger than life’s experience, was boiling. The faces of the convicts were dark with rage.

On the office porch stood the camp chief, Victor Nikolaevich Plutalov. The chief’s face was also dark with rage. Our tiny column stopped in front of the office, and Plutalov called me into the office.

‘So, you say the state is worse than the camp criminals?’ Plutalov stared at me from under lowered brows, biting his lips and sitting uncomfortably on a stool behind his desk.

I said nothing. Skoroseev! The impatient Mr Plutalov didn’t conceal his stoolie, didn’t wait for two hours! Or was something else the matter?

‘I don’t give a damn how you run off at the mouth. But what am I supposed to do if it’s reported to me? Or, in your language, someone squeals?’

‘Yes sir, it’s called squealing.’

‘All right, get back to work. You’d all eat each other alive if you had the chance. Politicians! A universal language. Everyone is going to understand one another. But I’m in charge here. I have to do something, if they squeal to me…’

Plutalov spat angrily.

A week passed, and I was shipped off with the latest group to leave the blessed prospecting group for the big mine. On the very first day I took the place of a horse in a wooden yoke, heaving with my chest against a wooden log.

Skoroseev remained in the prospecting group.

They were putting on an amateur performance in camp, and the wandering actor, who was also master of ceremonies, came running out to encourage the nervous performers offstage (one of the hospital wards). ‘The performance’s going great! It’s a great performance!’ he would whisper into the ear of each participant. ‘It’s a great performance!’ he announced loudly and strode back and forth, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a dirty rag.

Everything was very professional; the wandering actor had himself once been a star. Someone on stage was reading aloud a story of Zoschenko, ‘Lemonade’. The master of ceremonies leaned over to me:

‘Give me a smoke!’

‘Sure.’

‘You wouldn’t believe it,’ the master of ceremonies said suddenly, ‘but if I didn’t know better, I’d swear it was that bitch Skoroseev.’

‘Skoroseev?’ Now I knew whose intonations the voice on stage had reminded me of.

‘I’m an Esperantist. Do you understand? It’s a universal language. No “basic English” for me. That’s what I got my sentence for. I’m a member of the Moscow Society of Esperantists.’

‘Oh, you mean Article 5, Paragraph 6? A spy?’

‘Obviously.’

‘Ten years?’

‘Fifteen.’

‘But where does Skoroseev fit in?’

‘Skoroseev was the vice-chairman of the society. He’s the one who sold us all out, testified against everyone.’

‘Kind of short?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Where’s he now?’

‘I don’t know, but I’d strangle him with my bare hands. I ask you as a friend [I had known the actor for about two hours – no more]: hit him in the face if you meet him. Right in the mug, and half your sins will be forgiven you.’

‘Half, for sure?’

‘For sure.’

But the reader of Zoschenko's 'Lemonade' was already walking offstage. It wasn't Skoroseev, but tall, lanky Baron Mendel. He looked like a prince from the Romanov dynasty and counted Pushkin among his ancestors. I was somewhat disappointed as I looked Pushkin's descendant over, and the master of ceremonies was already leading his next victim on to the stage. He declaimed Gorky's 'Wind gathers the clouds over the sea's gray plain'.

'Just listen,' the baron leaned over to me. 'What kind of poetry is that? That kind of howling wind and thunder isn't poetry. Just imagine! In that same year, that same day and hour, Blok wrote his "Oath in Fire and Gloom", and Bely wrote "Gold in Azure"…'

I envied the baron's happiness. He could lose himself, flee into verse.

Many years had passed, and nothing was forgotten. I arrived in Magadan after being released from camp and was attempting to free myself in a true fashion, to cross that terrible sea over which I had once been brought to Kolyma. And although I realized how difficult it would be to exist during my eternal wanderings, I didn't want to remain on the cursed Kolyma soil by choice.

I had little money, and a truck headed in my direction had brought me to Magadan for a ruble per kilometer. The town was shrouded by a white fog. I had acquaintances here. They had to be here. But one seeks out acquaintances here in the day, and not at night. At night, no one will open even for a familiar voice. I needed a roof over my head, a berth, sleep.

I stood in the bus station and gazed at the floor which was completely covered with bodies, objects, sacks, crates. If worse came to worst… It was as cold here as on the street, perhaps forty-five degrees below zero. The iron stove had no fire in it, and the station door was constantly opening.

'Don't I know you?'

In the savage frost I was glad to see even Skoroseev. We shook hands through our mittens.

'You can stay at my place. My house is nearby. I was released quite a while back. Got a mortgage and built a house. Even got married.' Skoroseev burst out laughing. 'We'll have some tea…'

It was so cold, I agreed. For a long time we made our way over the hills and ruts of night-time Magadan with its shroud of cold milky darkness.

'Yes, I built a house,' Skoroseev was saying as I smoked, resting up. 'Got a government loan. Decided to build a nest. A northern nest.'

I drank some tea, lay down, and fell asleep. But I slept badly in spite of my distant journey. Somehow yesterday had been lived badly. When I woke up, washed, and had a smoke, I understood how I had lived yesterday badly.

‘Well, I’ll be going. I have a friend not far from here.’

‘Leave your suitcase. If you find your friends, you can come back for it.’

‘No, this is too far away.’

‘I really wish you’d stay. After all, we are old friends.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Goodbye.’

I buttoned my coat, picked up the suitcase and reached for the door handle. ‘Goodbye.’

‘What about the money?’ said Skoroseev.

‘What money?’

‘For the night. It’s not free.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that.’

I put down the suitcase, unbuttoned my coat, groped for the money in my pockets and paid. The fog was milky yellow in the day.

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# *Major Pugachov's Last Battle*

A lot of time must have passed between the beginning and end of these events, for the human experience acquired in the far north is so great that months are considered equivalent to years. Even the state recognizes this by increasing salaries and fringe benefits to workers of the north. It is a land of hopes and therefore of rumors, guesses, suppositions, and hypothesizing. In the north any event is encrusted with rumor more quickly than a local official's emergency report about it can reach the 'higher spheres'.

It was rumored that when a party boss on an inspection tour described the camp's cultural activities as lame on both feet, the 'activities director', Major Pugachov, said to the guest:

'Don't let that bother you, sir, we're preparing a concert that all Kolyma will talk about.'

We could begin the story straightaway with the report of Braude, a surgeon sent by the central hospital to the region of military activities. We could begin with the letter of Yashka Kuchen, a convict orderly who was a patient in the hospital. Kuchen wrote the letter with his left hand, since his right shoulder had been shot clean through by a rifle-bullet.

Or we could begin with the story of Dr Potalina who saw nothing, heard nothing, and was gone when all the unusual eve-nts took place. It was precisely her absence that the prosecutor classified as a 'false alibi', criminal inaction, or whatever the term may be in legal jargon.

The arrests of the thirties were arrests of random victims on the false and terrifying theory of a heightened class struggle accompanying the strengthening of socialism. The professors, union officials, soldiers, and workers who filled the prisons to overflowing at that period had nothing to defend themselves with except, perhaps, personal honesty and naïveté – precisely those qualities that lightened rather than hindered the punitive

work of ‘justice’ of the day. The absence of any unifying idea undermined the moral resistance of the prisoners to an unusual degree. They were neither enemies of the government nor state criminals, and they died, not even understanding why they had to die. Their self-esteem and bitterness had no point of support. Separated, they perished in the white Kolyma desert from hunger, cold, work, beatings, and diseases. They immediately learned not to defend or support each other. This was precisely the goal of the authorities. The souls of those who remained alive were utterly corrupted, and their bodies did not possess the qualities necessary for physical labor.

After the war, ship after ship delivered their replacements – former Soviet citizens who were ‘repatriated’ directly to the far north-east.

Among them were many people with different experiences and habits acquired during the war, courageous people who knew how to take chances and who believed only in the gun. There were officers and soldiers, fliers and scouts…

Accustomed to the angelic patience and slavish submissiveness of the ‘Trotskyites’, the camp administration was not in the least concerned and expected nothing new.

New arrivals asked the surviving ‘aborigines’:

‘Why do you eat your soup and kasha in the dining-hall, but take your bread with you back to the barracks? Why can’t you eat the bread with your soup the way the rest of the world does?’

Smiling with the cracks of their blue mouths and showing their gums, toothless from scurvy, the local residents would answer the naïve newcomers:

‘In two weeks each of you will understand, and each of you will do the same.’

How could they be told that they had never in their lives known true hunger, hunger that lasts for years and breaks the will? How could anyone explain the passionate, all-engulfing desire to prolong the process of eating, the supreme bliss of washing down one’s bread ration with a mug of tasteless, but hot melted snow in the barracks?

But not all of the newcomers shook their heads in contempt and walked away.

Major Pugachov clearly realized that they had been delivered to their deaths – to replace these living corpses. They had been brought in the fall.

With winter coming on, there was no place to run to, but in the summer a man could at least die free even if he couldn’t hope to escape completely.

It was virtually the only conspiracy in twenty years, and its web was spun all winter.

Pugachov realized that only those who did not work in the mine’s general work gang could survive the winter and still be capable of an escape attempt. After a few weeks in the work gang no one would run anywhere.

Slowly, one by one, the participants of the conspiracy became trusties. Soldatov became a cook, and Pugachov himself was appointed activities director. There were two work gang leaders, a paramedic and Ivashenko, who had formerly been a mechanic and now repaired weapons for the guards.

But no one was permitted outside ‘the wire’ without guards.

The blinding Kolyma spring began – without a single drop of rain, without any movement of ice on the rivers, without the singing of any bird. Little by little, the sun melted the snow, leaving it only in those crevices where warm rays couldn’t pierce. In the canyons and ravines, the snow lay like silver bullion till the next year.

And the designated day arrived.

There was a knock at the door of the guard hut next to the camp gates where one door led in and the other out of the camp. The guard on duty yawned and glanced at the clock. It was five a.m. ‘Just five,’ he thought.

The guard threw back the latch and admitted the man who had knocked. It was the camp cook, the convict Gorbunov. He’d come for the keys to the food storeroom. The keys were kept in the guardhouse, and Gorbunov came for them three times a day. He returned them later.

The guard on duty was supposed to open the kitchen cupboard, but he knew it was hopeless to try to control the cook, that no locks would help if the cook wanted to steal, so he entrusted the keys to the cook – especially at five in the morning.

The guard had worked more than ten years in Kolyma, had been receiving a double salary for a long time, and had given the keys to the cooks thousands of times.

‘Take ’em,’ he muttered and reached for the ruler to write up the morning report.

Gorbunov walked behind the guard, took the keys from the nail, put them in his pocket, and grabbed the guard from behind by the neck. At that very

moment the door opened and the mechanic, Ivashenko, came through the door leading into the camp.

Ivashenko helped Gorbunov strangle the guard and drag his body behind the cabinet. Ivashenko stuck the guard's revolver into his own pocket. Through the window that faced outward they could see a second guard returning along the path. Hurriedly Ivashenko donned the coat and cap of the dead man, snapped the belt shut, and sat down at the table as if he were the guard. The second guard opened the door and strode into the dark hovel of the guardhouse. He was immediately seized, strangled, and thrown behind the cabinet.

Gorbunov put on the guard's clothing; the two conspirators now had uniforms and weapons. Everything was proceeding according to Major Pugachov's schedule. Suddenly the wife of the second guard appeared. She'd come for the keys that her husband had accidentally taken with him.

'We won't strangle the woman,' said Gorbunov, and she was tied, gagged with a towel, and put in the corner.

One of the work gangs returned from work. This had been foreseen. The overseer who entered the guardhouse was immediately disarmed and bound by the two 'guards'. His rifle was now in the hands of the escapees. From that moment Major Pugachov took command of the operation.

The area before the gates was open to fire from two guard towers. The sentries noticed nothing unusual.

A work gang was formed somewhat earlier than usual, but in the north who can say what is early and what is late? It seemed early, but maybe it was late.

The work gang of ten men moved down the road to the mine, two by two in column. In the front and in the rear, six meters from the column of prisoners as required by the instructions, were two overcoated guards. One of them held a rifle.

From the guard tower the sentry noticed that the group turned from the road on to the path that led past the buildings where all sixty of the guards were quartered.

The sleeping quarters of the guards were located in the far end of the building. Just before the door stood the guard hut of the man on duty, and pyramids of rifles. Drowsing by the window the guard noticed, in a half-sleep, that one of the other guards was leading a gang of prisoners down the path past the windows of the guard quarters.

‘That must be Chernenko,’ the duty officer thought. ‘I must remember to write a report on him.’

The duty officer was grand master of petty squabbles, and he never missed a legitimate opportunity to play a dirty trick on someone.

This was his last thought. The door flew open and three soldiers came running into the barracks. Two rushed to the doors of the sleeping quarters and the third shot the duty officer point-blank. The soldiers were followed by the prisoners, who rushed to the pyramid of weapons; in their hands were rifles and machine-guns. Major Pugachov threw open the door to the sleeping quarters. The soldiers, barefoot and still in their underwear, rushed to the door, but two machine-gun bursts at the ceiling stopped them.

‘Lie down,’ Pugachov ordered, and the soldiers crawled under their cots. The machine-gunners remained on guard beside the door.

The ‘work gang’ changed unhurriedly into military uniform and began gathering up food, weapons, and ammunition.

Pugachov ordered them not to take any food except biscuits and chocolate. In return they took as many weapons and as much ammunition as possible.

The paramedic hung the first-aid bag over his shoulder.

Once again the escapees felt they were soldiers.

Before them was the taiga, but was it any more terrible than the marshes of Stokhod?

They walked out on to the highway, and Pugachov raised his hand to stop a passing truck.

‘Get out!’ He opened the door of the driver’s cab.

‘But I…’

‘Climb out, I tell you.’

The driver got out, and Georgadze, lieutenant of the tank troops, got behind the wheel. Beside him was Pugachov. The escapee soldiers crawled into the back, and the truck sped off.

‘There ought to be a right turn about here.’

‘We’re out of gas!’

Pugachov cursed.

They entered the taiga as if they were diving into water, disappearing immediately in the enormous silent forest. Checking the map, they remained on the cherished path to freedom, pushing their way straight through the amazing local underbrush.

Camp was set up quickly for the night, as if they were used to doing it.

Only Ashot and Malinin couldn't manage to quiet down.

'What's the problem over there?' asked Pugachov.

'Ashot keeps trying to prove that Adam was deported from paradise to Ceylon.'

'Why Ceylon?'

'That's what the Muslims say,' responded Ashot.

'Are you a Tartar?'

'Not me, my wife is.'

'I never heard anything of the sort,' said Pugachov, smiling.

'Right, and neither did I,' Malinin joined in.

'All right, knock it off. Let's get some sleep.'

It was cold and Major Pugachov woke up. Soldatov was sitting up, alert, holding the machine-gun on his knees. Pugachov lay on his back and located the North Star, the favorite star of all wanderers. The constellations here were arranged differently than in European Russia; the map of the firmament was slightly shifted, and the Big Dipper had slid down to the horizon. The taiga was cold and stern, and the enormous twisted pines stood far from each other. The forest was filled with the anxious silence familiar to all hunters. This time Pugachov was not the hunter, but a tracked beast, and the forest silence was thrice dangerous.

It was his first night of liberty, the first night after long months and years of torment. Lying on his back, he recalled how everything before him had begun as if it were a detective film. It was as if Pugachov were playing back a film of his twelve comrades so that the lazy everyday course of events flashed by with unbelievable speed. And now they had finished the film and were staring at the inscription, *The End*. They were free, but this was only the beginning of the struggle, the game, of life…

Major Pugachov remembered the German prisoner-of-war camp from which he had escaped in 1944. The front was nearing the town, and he was working as a truck driver on clean-up details inside the enormous camp. He recalled how he had driven through the single strand of barbed wire at high speed, ripping up the wooden posts that had been hurriedly punched into the ground. He remembered the sentry shots, shouting, the mad, zigzag drive through the town, the abandoned truck, the night road to the front and the meetings with his army, the interrogation, the accusation of espionage, and the sentence – twenty-five years.

Major Pugachov remembered how Vlasov's emissaries had come to the camp with a 'manifesto' to the hungry, tormented Russian soldiers.

'Your government has long since renounced you. Any prisoner of war is a traitor in the eyes of your government,' the Vlasovites said. And they showed Moscow newspapers with their orders and speeches. The prisoners of war had already heard of this earlier. It was no accident that Russian prisoners of war were the only ones not to receive packages. Frenchmen, Americans, Englishmen, and prisoners of all nations received packages, letters, had their own national clubs, and enjoyed each other's friendship. The Russians had nothing except hunger and bitterness for the entire world. It was no wonder that so many men from the German prisoner-of-war camps joined the 'Russian Army of Liberation'.

Major Pugachov did not believe Vlasov's officers until he made his way back to the Red Army. Everything that the Vlasovites had said was true. The government had no use for him. The government was afraid of him. Later came the cattle cars with bars on the windows and guards, the long trip to Eastern Siberia, the sea, the ship's hold, and the gold-mines of the far north. And the hungry winter.

Pugachov sat up, and Soldatov gestured to him with his hand. It was Soldatov who had the honor of beginning the entire affair, although he was among the last to be accepted into the conspiracy. Soldatov had not lost his courage, panicked, or betrayed anyone. A good man!

At his feet lay Captain Khrustalyov, a flier whose fate was similar to Pugachov's: his plane shot down by the Germans, captivity, hunger, escape, and a military tribunal and the forced-labor camp. Khrustalyov had just turned over on his other side, and his cheek was red from where he had been lying on it. It was Khrustalyov to whom Pugachov had first chosen several months before to reveal his plan. They agreed it was better to die than be a convict, better to die with a gun in hand than be exhausted by hunger, rifle butts, and the boots of the guards.

Both Khrustalyov and the major were men of action, and they discussed in minute detail the insignificant chance for which these twelve men were risking their lives. The plan was to hijack a plane from the airport. There were several airports in the vicinity, and the men were on their way through the taiga to the nearest one. Khrustalyov was the group leader whom the escapees sent for after attacking the guards. Pugachov didn't want to leave

without his closest friend. Now Khrustalyov was sleeping quietly and soundly.

Next to him lay Ivashenko, the mechanic who repaired the guards' weapons. Ivashenko had learned everything they needed to know for a successful operation: where the weapons were kept, who was on duty, where the munitions stores were. Ivashenko had been a military intelligence officer.

Levitsky and Ignatovich, pilots and friends of Captain Khrustalyov, lay pressed against each other.

The tankman, Polyakov, had spread his hands on the backs of his neighbors, the huge Georgadze and the bald joker Ashot, whose surname the major couldn't remember at the moment. Head resting on his first-aid bag, Sasha Malinin was sound asleep. He'd started out as a paramedic – first in the army, then in the camps, then under Pugachov's command.

Pugachov smiled. Each had surely imagined the escape in his own way, but Pugachov could see that everything was going smoothly and each understood the other perfectly. Pugachov was convinced he had done the right thing. Each knew that events were developing as they should. There was a commander, there was a goal – a confident commander and a difficult goal. There were weapons and freedom. They slept a sound soldier's sleep even in this empty pale-lilac polar night with its strange but beautiful light in which the trees cast no shadows.

He had promised them freedom, and they had received freedom. He led them to their deaths, and they didn't fear death.

'No one betrayed us,' thought Pugachov, 'right up to the very last day.' Many people in the camp had known of the planned escape. Selection of participants had taken several months, and Pugachov had spoken openly to many who refused, but no one had turned them in. This knowledge reconciled Pugachov with life.

'They're good men,' he whispered and smiled.

They ate some biscuits and chocolate and went on in silence, led by the almost indistinguishable path.

'It's a bear path,' said Soldatov who had hunted in Siberia.

Pugachov and Khrustalyov climbed up to the pass to a cartographic tripod and used the telescope to look down to the gray stripes of the river and highway. The river was like any other river, but the highway was filled with trucks and people for tens of miles.

‘Must be convicts,’ suggested Khrustalyov.

Pugachov examined them carefully.

‘No, they’re soldiers looking for us. We’ll have to split up,’ said Pugachov. ‘Eight men can sleep in the haystacks, and the four of us will check out that ravine. We’ll return by morning if everything looks all right.’

They passed through a small grove of trees to the river-bed. They had to run back.

‘Look, there are too many of them. We’ll have to go back up the river.’

Breathing heavily, they quickly climbed back up the river-bed, inadvertently dislodging loose rocks that roared down right to the feet of the attackers.

Levitsky turned, fired, and fell. A bullet had caught him square in the eye.

Georgadze stopped beside a large rock, turned, and stopped the soldiers coming after them with a machine-gun burst. But it was not for long; his machine-gun jammed, and only the rifle was still functioning.

‘Go on alone,’ said Khrustalyov to the major. ‘I’ll cover you.’ He aimed methodically, shooting at anyone who showed himself. Khrustalyov caught up with them, shouting: ‘They’re coming.’ He fell, and people began running out from behind the large rock.

Pugachov rushed forward, fired at the attackers, and leaped down from the pass’s plateau into the narrow river-bed. The stones he knocked loose as he fell roared down the slope.

He ran through the roadless taiga until his strength failed.

Above the forest meadow the sun rose, and the people hiding in haystacks could easily make out figures of men in military uniforms on all sides of the meadow.

‘I guess this is the end?’ Ivashenko said, and nudged Khachaturian with his elbow.

‘Why the end?’ Ashot said as he aimed. The rifle shot rang out, and a soldier fell on the path.

At a command the soldiers rushed the swamp and haystacks. Shots cracked and groans were heard.

The attack was repulsed. Several wounded men lay among the clumps of marsh grass.

‘Medic, crawl over there,’ an officer ordered. They’d shown foresight and brought along Yasha Kushen, a former resident of West Byelorussia,

now a convict paramedic. Without saying a word, convict Kushen crawled over to the wounded man, waving his first-aid bag. The bullet that struck Kushen in the shoulder stopped him halfway.

The head of the guard detail that the escapees had just disarmed jumped up without any sign of fear and shouted:

‘Hey, Ivashenko, Soldatov, Pugachov. Give up, you’re surrounded. There’s no way out!’

‘OK, come and get the weapons,’ shouted Ivashenko from behind the haystack.

And Bobylyov, head of the guards, ran splashing through the marsh toward the haystacks.

He had covered half the way when Ivashenko’s shot cracked out. The bullet caught Bobylyov directly in the forehead.

‘Good boy,’ Soldatov praised his comrade. ‘The chief was so brave because they would have either shot him for our escape or given him a sentence in the camps. Hold your ground!’

They were shooting from all directions. Machine-guns began to crackle.

Soldatov felt a burning sensation in both legs, and the head of the dead Ivashenko fell on his shoulder.

Another haystack fell silent. A dozen bodies lay in the marsh.

Soldatov kept on shooting until something struck him in the head and he lost consciousness.

Nikolay Braude, chief surgeon of the main hospital, was summoned by Major General Artemyev, one of four Kolyma generals and chief of the whole Kolyma camp. Braude was sent to the village of Lichan together with ‘two paramedics, bandages, and surgical instruments’. That was how the order read.

Braude didn’t try to guess what might have happened and quickly set out as directed in a beat-up one-and-a-half-ton hospital truck. Powerful Studebakers loaded with armed soldiers streamed past the hospital truck on the highway. It was only about twenty miles, but because of frequent stops caused by heavy traffic and roadblocks to check documents, it took Braude three hours to reach the area.

Major General Artemyev was waiting for the surgeon in the apartment of the local camp head. Both Braude and Artemyev were long-term residents of Kolyma and fate had brought them together a number of times in the past.

‘What’s up, a war?’ Braude asked the general when they met.

‘I don’t know if you’d call it a war, but there were twenty-eight dead in the first battle. You’ll see the wounded yourself.’

While Braude washed his hands in a basin hanging on the door, the general told him of the escape.

‘And you called for planes, I suppose? A couple of squadrons, a few bombs here and there… Or maybe you opted for an atom bomb?’

‘That’s right, make a joke of it,’ said the general. ‘I tell you I’m not joking when I say that I’m waiting for my orders. I’ll be lucky if I just lose my job. They could even try me. Things like that have happened before.’

Yes, Braude knew that things like that had happened before. Several years earlier three thousand people were sent on foot in winter to one of the ports, but supplies stored on shore were destroyed by a storm while the group was underway. Of three thousand, only three hundred people remained alive. The second-in-command in the camp administration who had signed the orders to send the group was made a scapegoat and tried.

Braude and his paramedics worked until evening, removing bullets, amputating, bandaging. Only soldiers of the guard were among the wounded; there were no escapees.

The next day toward evening more wounded were brought in. Surrounded by officers of the guard, two soldiers carried in the first and only escapee whom Braude was to see. The escapee was in military uniform and differed from the soldiers only in that he was unshaven. Both shin-bones and his left shoulder were broken by bullets, and there was a head wound with damage to the parietal bone. The man was unconscious.

Braude rendered him first aid and, as Artemyev had ordered, the wounded man and his guards were taken to the central hospital where there were the necessary facilities for a serious operation.

It was all over. Nearby stood an army truck covered with a tarpaulin. It contained the bodies of the dead escapees. Next to it was a second truck with the bodies of the dead soldiers.

But Major Pugachov was crawling down the edge of the ravine.

They could have sent the army home after this victory, but trucks with soldiers continued to travel along the thousand-mile highway for many days.

They couldn’t find the twelfth man – Major Pugachov.

Soldatov took a long time to recover – to be shot. But then that was the only death sentence out of sixty. Such was the number of friends and acquaintances who were sent before the military tribunal. The head of the local camp was sentenced to ten years. The head of the medical section, Dr Potalina, was acquitted, and she changed her place of employment almost as soon as the trial was over. Major General Artemyev's words were prophetic: he was removed from his position in the guard.

Pugachov dragged himself into the narrow throat of the cave. It was a bear's den, the beast's winter quarters, and the animal had long since left to wander the taiga. Bear hairs could still be seen on the cave walls and stone floor.

'How quickly it's all ended,' thought Pugachov. 'They'll bring dogs and find me.'

Lying in the cave, he remembered his difficult male life, a life that was to end on a bear path in the taiga. He remembered people – all of whom he had respected and loved, beginning with his mother. He remembered his schoolteacher, Maria Ivanovna, and her quilted jacket of threadbare black velvet that was turning red. There were many, many others with whom fate had thrown him together.

But better than all, more noble than all were his eleven dead comrades. None of the other people in his life had endured such disappointments, deceit, lies. And in this northern hell they had found within themselves the strength to believe in him, Pugachov, and to stretch out their hands to freedom. These men who had died in battle were the best men he had known in his life.

Pugachov picked a blueberry from a shrub that grew at the entrance to the cave. Last year's wrinkled fruit burst in his fingers, and he licked them clean. The overripe fruit was as tasteless as snow water. The skin of the berry stuck to his dry tongue.

Yes, they were the best. He remembered Ashot's surname now; it was Khachaturian.

Major Pugachov remembered each of them, one after the other, and smiled at each. Then he put the muzzle of the pistol in his mouth and for the last time in his life fired a shot.

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# *The Used-Book Dealer*

It all began some time before my release from Kolyma. I had been transferred from night into day – clearly a promotion, a confirmation, a success along the dangerous path to salvation of an orderly recruited from among the patients. I never noticed who took my place, for in those days I lacked the strength necessary for curiosity and I hoarded my movements – spiritual and physical. I'd accomplished resurrections before, and I knew how dearly one paid for unnecessary curiosity.

In a nocturnal half-sleep and out of the corner of my eye, however, I saw a pale dirty face grown over with reddish bristles, cavernous eyes – eyes whose color I couldn't remember – and hooked frostbitten fingers clutching the handle of the smoky kettle. The barracks' hospital night was so dark and thick that the flame of the kerosene lantern, wavering and flickering as if in the wind, was not enough to light up the corridor, the ceiling, the wall, the door, the floor. The light ripped from the darkness only a piece of the night: a corner of the bedside table and the pale face bent over it. The new man on duty was dressed in the same gown that I used to wear. It was a dirty, torn gown – an ordinary gown intended for the patients. During the day this filthy garment hung in the hospital ward and at night was donned over the quilted jacket of the orderly on duty, who was always chosen from among the patients. The flannel was so extraordinarily thin it was transparent, but nevertheless it didn't tear. Perhaps the patients made no abrupt movements for fear that the gown would disintegrate. Or perhaps they were unable to.

The semicircle of light swayed back and forth, wavered, reached out in sudden movements. It seemed that the cold and not the wind swung the light above the night table of the orderly on duty. It was not the wind, but the cold itself that moved the light. Within the circle of light swung a face twisted with hunger, and hooked fingers searched the kettle's bottom for

something no spoon could catch. Even frostbitten, the fingers were more reliable than a spoon; at once I understood the essence of the movement, the language of gesture.

There was no reason for me to know all this; I was only the day orderly.

But a few days later, fate was unexpectedly prodded by a sudden and hurried departure in the back of a jolting truck. The vehicle crawled south toward Magadan along the bed of a nameless river that served as a winter road through the taiga. In the back of the truck two human beings were repeatedly tossed upward and dropped back on to the floor with a wooden thud as if they were logs. The guard was sitting in the cab, and I couldn't tell if I was being struck by a piece of wood or a man. At one of the feeding stops my neighbor's greedy chomping struck me as familiar, and I recognized the hooked fingers and the pale dirty face.

We didn't speak to each other; each feared he might frighten off his happiness, his convict joy. The truck hurried on into the next day, and the road came to an end.

We had both been selected by the camp to take paramedic courses. Magadan, the hospital, and the courses were cloaked in fog, a white Kolyma fog. Were there markers, road markers? Would they accept political prisoners convicted under Article 58 of the Criminal Code? Only those who came under Point 10. And how about my neighbor in the rear of the truck? He too was ASA – anti-Soviet agitation. That was considered the same as Point 10.

There was an examination on the Russian language. A dictation. The grades were posted the same day. I got an 'A'. After that came a written examination on mathematics, and I received another 'A'. It was taken for granted that future students were not required to know the fine points of the Soviet Constitution… I lay on the bunk, dirty and still literally lousy. The job of orderly didn't destroy lice. But perhaps it only seemed that way to me; lice infestation is one of the camp neuroses. I didn't have lice any more, but I still couldn't force myself to get used to the thought or, rather, to the feeling that the lice were gone. I had experienced that feeling two or three times. As for the 'constitution' or political economics, such things were no more intended for us than was the luxurious Astoria Hotel. In Butyr Prison the guard on duty in our cell block shouted at me: 'Why do you keep asking about the Constitution? Your Constitution is the Criminal Code!' And he was right. Yes, the Criminal Code was our constitution. That was a long

time ago. A thousand years. The fourth subject was chemistry. My grade was ‘C’.

Oh, how those convict students strove for knowledge when the stakes of the game were life! How former professors of medicine strove to beat their life-saving knowledge into the heads of ignoramuses and idiots. From the storekeeper Silaikin down to the Tartar writer Min-Shabay, none of them had ever shown the slightest interest in medicine.

Twisting his thin lips in a sneer, the surgeon asked:

‘Who invented penicillin?’

‘Fleming!’ The answer was given not by me, but by my neighbor from the district hospital. His red bristles were shaven off, and there remained only an unhealthy pale puffiness in the cheeks. (He had gorged himself on soup, I immediately realized.)

I was amazed at the red-headed student’s knowledge. The surgeon sized up the triumphant ‘Fleming’. Who are you, night orderly? Who? Who were you before prison?

‘I’m a captain. A captain of the engineering troops. At the beginning of the war I was chief of the fortified area on Dicson Island. We had to put up fortifications in a hurry. In the fall of ’41 when the morning fog broke we saw the German raider *Graf Spee* in the bay. The raider shot up all our fortifications point-blank. And left. And I got ten years. “If you don’t believe it, consider it a fairy tale.” ’

All the students studied through the night, passionately soaking up knowledge with all the appetite of men condemned to death but suddenly given the chance of a reprieve.

After a meeting with the higher-ups, however, Fleming’s spirits lifted and he brought a novel to the barracks, where everyone else was studying. As he finished off some boiled fish, the remnants of someone else’s feast, he carelessly leafed through the book.

Catching my ironic smile, Fleming said:

‘What’s the difference? We’ve been studying for three months now, and anyone who’s lasted this long will finish and get his certificate. Why should I go crazy studying? You have to know how to look at things.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I want to learn to treat people. I want to learn a real skill.’

‘Knowing how to live is a real skill.’

It was then that I learned that Fleming’s claim to having been a captain was only a mask, another mask on that pale prison face. The rank of captain

was real; the bit about the engineering troops was an invention. Fleming had been in the NKVD – the secret police – with the rank of captain. Information on his past had been accumulating drop by drop for several years. A drop was a measure of time, something like a water clock. This drop fell on the bare skull of a person being interrogated; such was the water clock of the Leningrad prisons of the thirties. Sand clocks measured the time allotted for exercise. Water clocks measured the time of confession, the period of investigation. Clocks of sand drained with fleeting speed; water clocks were tormentingly slow. Water clocks didn't count or measure minutes; they measured the human soul, the will, destroying it drop by drop, eroding it just as water erodes a rock. This piece of folklore about investigations was very popular in the thirties and even in the twenties.

Captain Fleming's words were gathered drop by drop, and the treasure turned out to be priceless. Fleming himself considered it priceless. It could not have been otherwise, and I remember our conversations very clearly.

'Do you know the greatest secret of our time?'

'What?'

'The trials of the thirties. You know how they prepared them? I was in Leningrad at the time. I worked with Zakovsky. The preparation of the trials was all chemistry, medicine, pharmacology. They had more will-suppressants than you could shake a stick at. You don't think that if such suppressants exist, they wouldn't use them? The Geneva Agreement or something like that…

'It would have been too human to possess chemical will-suppressants and not use them on the "internal front". This and only this is the secret of the trials of the thirties, the open trials, open to foreign correspondents and to any Feucht-wanger. There were no "doubles" in those trials. The secret of the trials was the secret of pharmacology…'

I lay on the short uncomfortable bunk in the empty student barracks which was shot through with rays of sunshine and listened to these admissions.

'There were experiments earlier – in the sabotage trials, for example. That comic trial of Ramzin touches on pharmacology very slightly.'

Fleming's story seeped through drop by drop, or was it his own blood that fell on my bare memory? What sort of drops were these – blood, tears, or ink? They weren't ink, and they weren't tears.

'Of course, there are instances when medicine is powerless. Or sometimes the solutions aren't prepared properly. There were rules to double-check everything.'

'Where are those doctors now?'

'Who knows? On the moon probably…'

The investigator has all the latest scientific discoveries and technology in his arsenal, the latest in pharmacology.

'It wasn't cabinet "A" – toxic or poisonous – and not cabinet "B" – strong effect…' It turns out that the Latin word 'hero' is translated in Russian as 'having a strong effect'. And where were Captain Fleming's medications kept? In cabinet 'C', the crime cabinet or in cabinet 'M' – for magic?

A person who had access to cabinet 'C', cabinet 'M', and the most advanced scientific discoveries had to take a course for hospital orderlies to learn that man has one liver, that the liver is not a paired organ. He learned about blood circulation three hundred years after Harvey.

The secret was kept in laboratories, in underground offices, in stinking cages where the animals smelled like convicts in the Magadan transit prison in '38. In comparison with this transit prison, Butyr was a model of surgical immaculateness and smelled more like an operating-room than an animal's cage.

All scientific and technological discoveries are checked first of all for any military significance, even to the extent of speculating on their possible future military uses. And only that which has been sifted through by the generals and found to have no relevance to war is given over for the common use.

Medicine, chemistry, pharmacology have long since been placed under military control. Throughout the world, institutes for the study of the brain have always accumulated the results of experiments, observations. Borgia's poisons were always a weapon of *Realpolitik*. The twentieth century brought with it an extraordinary tide of pharmacological and chemical preparations for the control of the psyche.

But if it is possible to obliterate fear with medicine, the opposite is true a thousand times – it is possible to suppress the human will by injections, by pure pharmacology and chemistry without making use of any ‘physical’ methods such as breaking ribs and knocking out teeth, stubbing out cigarettes on the body of the person under investigation, or trampling him with the heels of boots.

These two schools of investigation were known as physics and chemistry. The physicists regarded purely physical persuasion as the cornerstone of their building and viewed beatings as a means of revealing the moral foundations of the world. Once revealed, how base and worthless were the depths of human essence! Beatings could achieve any testimony. Under the threat of a club, inventors made scientific discoveries, wrote verse and novels. The fear of beating and the stomach’s scale for measuring its ‘ration’ worked miracles.

Beating is a sufficiently weighty and effective psychological weapon.

Many useful results were produced by the famous and ubiquitous ‘conveyor’ in which the investigators alternated without giving the arrested person a chance to sleep. After seventeen days without sleep a man loses his sanity. Has this scientific observation been made in the offices of political investigators?

But neither did the chemical school retreat.

Physics could guarantee material for ‘Special Councils’ and all sorts of ‘troikas’ where a triumvirate of judges would make their decisions behind closed doors. The School of Physical Inducement, however, could not be applied in open trials. The School of Physical Inducement (I believe that’s the term used by Stanislavsky) could not publicly present its theater of blood, could not have prepared the ‘open trials’ that made all mankind tremble. The preparation of such spectacles was within the realm of competency of the chemists.

Twenty years after these conversations with Fleming I include in this story lines taken from a newspaper article:

Through the application of certain psychopharmacological agents it is possible, for example, to remove a human being’s sense of fear for a limited

time. Of particular importance is the fact that the clarity of his consciousness is not in the least disturbed in the process.

Later even more unexpected facts come to light. Persons whose ‘B phases’ of dream were suppressed for a long period of time – in the given instance for seventeen nights in a row – began to experience various disturbances in their psychic condition and conduct.

What is this? Fragments of testimony of some former NKVD officer during the trial of the judges? A letter from Vyshinsky or Riumin before their deaths? No, these are paragraphs taken from a scientific article written by a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. But all this – and a hundred times more – was learned, tried, and applied in the thirties in the preparation of the ‘open trials’!

Pharmacology was not the only weapon in the investigator’s arsenal of those years. Fleming mentioned a name that I knew well.

Ornaldo!

Of course! Ornaldo was a famous hypnotist who appeared frequently in the twenties in Moscow circuses, and not only in Moscow.

Ornaldo’s speciality was mass hypnosis. Books on hypnosis are illustrated with photographs of his famous tours. ‘Ornaldo’, of course, was a pseudonym. His real name was M. A. Smirnov, and he was a Moscow doctor. There were posters pasted all the way around special drums used for theatrical advertisements. Paolo-Svishev had a photograph hanging in the window on Stoleshnikov Lane. It was an enormous photograph of human eyes with the inscription ‘The Eyes of Ornaldo’. Even now I remember those eyes and the emotional confusion that I experienced whenever I heard or saw Ornaldo’s circus act. There are photographs of Ornaldo’s performances taken in 1929 in Baku. Then he left the stage.

‘Beginning in the middle of the thirties Ornaldo was in the secret employment of the NKVD.’

The shiver of a revealed secret ran down my back.

Fleming would frequently, and for no special reason, praise Leningrad. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that he admitted he wasn’t a native Leningrader. In fact, he had been recruited from the provinces by the aesthetes of the NKVD in the twenties as their worthy replacement. They grafted on to him tastes much broader than those provided by an ordinary

school education. Not just Turgenev and Nekrasev, but Bal-mont and Sologub, not just Pushkin, but Gumilyov as well:

‘ “And you, watchdogs of the king, pirates guarding gold in the dark port…” I’m not quoting the line incorrectly, am I?’

‘No, that’s right.’

‘I can’t remember the rest. Am I a watchdog of the king? Of the state?’

And smiling – both to himself and his past – he told with reverence how he had touched the file of the executed poet Gumilyov, calling it the affair of *lycée* pupils. It was as if a Pushkinist were telling how he had held the goose quill pen with which Pushkin wrote *Poltava*. It was just as if he had touched the Stone of Kaaba, such was the bliss, the purification in every feature of his face. I couldn’t help but think that this too was a way of being introduced to poetry, an amazing, extremely rare manner of introduction in the office of the criminal investigator. Of course the moral values of poetry are not transmitted in the process.

‘When reading books I would first of all turn to the notes, the comments. Man is a creature of notes and comments.’

‘How about the text?’

‘Not always. There is always time for that.’

Obscene as this may sound, Fleming and his co-workers could partake of culture only in their work as investigators. Their familiarity with persons of literary and social circles was distorted but nevertheless real and genuine in a sense, not concealed behind a thousand masks.

The chief informer on the artistic intelligentsia of those years was Major General Ignatiev. To hear the name of this former czarist diplomat and well-known memoirist was surprising only at first. A steady, thoughtful, and qualified author of all sorts of ‘memoranda’ and surveys of writers’ lives, he had served fifty years in the ranks. Forty of those years were spent in the Soviet spy network.

‘I’d already read the book *Fifty Years in the Ranks*, and was familiar with his surveys when they introduced me to him. Or him to me,’ Fleming said thoughtfully. ‘Not a bad book, *Fifty Years in the Ranks*.’

Fleming didn’t care much for newspapers, news, or radio programs. International events scarcely interested him. His emotional life was dominated by a deep resentment for that dark power that had promised the high-school boy he would fathom boundless depths, that had carried him to such heights and that had now shamelessly cast him into the abyss.

Fleming’s introduction to culture was peculiar – some brief courses and some excursions to the Hermitage. The boy grew into an investigator-aesthete who was shocked by the crude force that was rushing into the ‘organs of justice’ in the thirties. His type was swept away and destroyed by the ‘new wave’ that placed its faith in crude force and despised not only psychological refinements, but even the ‘conveyor’ and the method of not allowing the prisoner to sit down until he confessed. The new wave simply had no patience for any scientific calculations or lofty psychology. It was easier to get results with simple beatings. The slow aesthetes ended up on the moon. It was sheer chance that Fleming remained alive. The new wave couldn’t wait.

The hungry gleam in Fleming’s eyes faded, and the professional observer again made his voice heard.

‘You know, I was watching you during the pre-operative conference. You had something on your mind.’

‘I just want to remember everything, remember it and describe it.’

Some images swayed in Fleming’s already relaxed and calmed brain.

*

In the Magadan psychological ward where Fleming had worked there was an enormous Latvian. Every time the giant sat down to eat, Fleming would sit opposite him, unable to restrain his ecstasy at the sight of such a mountain of food.

Fleming never parted with his pot, the same pot which he had brought from the north. It was a talisman, a Kolyma talisman.

The criminal element in the psychological ward caught a cat, killed it, cooked it, and gave Fleming a portion as the traditional Kolyma tribute since he was the orderly on duty. Fleming ate the meat and kept silent about the cat. The cat was a pet in the surgical ward.

The students were afraid of Fleming. But whom didn’t the students fear? In the hospital Fleming was already working as an orderly, a staff medic. Everyone feared and hated him, sensing in him not only an employee of the secret police but also the master of some unusually important, terrible secret.

The antipathy grew, and the plot thickened after Fleming made a sudden trip to meet with a young Spanish woman. She was a real Spaniard, the daughter of one of the members of the government of the Republic of Spain. She'd been a spy, got involved in a web of provocations, was sentenced and sent to Kolyma to die. It turned out, however, that Fleming was not forgotten by his old and distant friends, his former colleagues. He had to learn something from the woman, to confirm something. But the patient couldn't wait. She had recovered and Was being sent to a women's mine. Interrupting his work in the hospital, Fleming suddenly traveled to the mine to meet the woman. He spent two days on the seven-hundred-kilometer road with its incessant flow of vehicles and a check-point every kilometer. Fleming was lucky, and he returned from the meeting safe and sound. The event could have taken place in a novel, a feat of camp love. Alas, Fleming didn't travel or accomplish any feats for the sake of love. His was a passion much stronger than love, the highest passion of all, and it would carry Fleming safely past all the camp checkpoints.

Fleming frequently recalled the thirties and the sudden flood of murders and suicides. There was the death of the family of Savinkov, the former revolutionary and terrorist. The son was shot, and the family – the wife, two children, and the wife's mother – did not wish to leave Leningrad. All wrote letters and left them for each other before killing themselves, and Fleming's memory preserved lines of a note from one of the children: 'Grandma, we're going to die soon…'

The sentence Fleming had received in connection with the NKVD affair ended in 1950, but he didn't return to Leningrad. He didn't receive permission. His wife, who had retained their room all those years, came to Magadan from Leningrad, wasn't able to make any living arrangements, and went back. Fleming returned to Leningrad just before the Twentieth Party Congress, to the same room he'd lived in before his disaster.

He had to do a lot of running around to get his pension of 1,400 old-style rubles that he was due for his years of service. His camp medical courses notwithstanding, he was not allowed to return to his old speciality as an expert on pharmacology. It turned out that all the former employees, all the veterans of these affairs, all the aesthetes who were still alive, had long since been put out to pasture – all of them, right down to the last courier.

Fleming got a job as a book selector in a second-hand bookstore on Liteiny Prospect. Although his relationship and contact with the Russian intelligentsia was such a peculiar one, he considered himself to be of its bone and flesh. To the end he refused to separate his fate from that of the Russian intelligentsia, feeling, perhaps, that only contact with books could help him preserve his skills, if only he could succeed in living till better times.

In the nineteenth century a captain in the ‘engineering troops’ would have taken vows and retreated to a monastery, as did the Russian writer Konstantin Leontiev. But the dangerous and lofty world of books was tinted with fanaticism for Fleming, and like any other infatuation with books, it served the function of a moral purge. The former admirer of Gumilyov and expert on both Gumilyov’s fate and his comments on verse could not become a night-watchman. Perhaps use his new profession of hospital orderly? No, better to be a used-book dealer.

‘I’m constantly running around, filling out forms. Bring us some rum,’ Fleming said, turning to the waitress.

‘I don’t drink,’ I replied.

‘How unfortunate, how inconvenient it is that you don’t drink. Katya, he doesn’t drink! You understand? I’m constantly working at it. I’ll return to my old job.’

‘If you go back’ Katya said with her blue lips, ‘I’ll hang myself or drown myself the very next day!’

‘I’m just kidding. I’m always kidding… I’m constantly presenting applications, running around the courts, traveling to Moscow. After all, they took me back in the party. But you know how?’

A wad of rumpled paper emerged from Fleming’s jacket pocket.

‘Read this. This is Drabkina’s testimony. She was a prisoner in my camp in Igarka. Later she published her memoirs under the title *Black Toast*.’

Quickly I read through the woman’s extensive testimony:

‘As head of the camp he treated the prisoners well and for this reason was soon arrested and convicted…’

I leafed through the dirty, sticky testimony of Drabkina which had passed through the careless fingers of government officials.

Bending down to my ear, his breath reeking of rum, Fleming explained hoarsely that he had been a ‘human being’ in camp, even Drabkina confirmed that.

‘Do you really need all this?’

‘I need it. It fills my life. Who knows, maybe I’ll pull it off. How about a drink?’

‘I don’t drink.’

‘For years of service. But that’s not what I need…’

‘Stop it, or I’ll hang myself!’ Katya shouted.

‘She’s got a heart condition,’ Fleming explained.

‘Take yourself in hand. Write. You have a good style. I know that from your letters. And a story or a novel is, after all, a confidential letter.’

‘No, I’m not a writer. I’m going to keep on working at what I started…’

And slobbering in my ear, he whispered something I could make neither head nor tail of, that supposedly there never was any Kolyma and that he himself had spent seventeen days on the ‘conveyor’ in ’37 and that his mind was not what it used to be.

‘They’re publishing a lot of memoirs now. For example, they just published Yakubovich’s *In the World of Outcasts*, his memoirs about his years in a czarist penal farm. Let them publish that stuff.’

‘Have you written any memoirs?’

‘No, but there is a book I want to recommend for publication. You know which one? I went to the Lenin Publishing House, but they told me to mind my own business…’

‘What book?’

‘The notes of Sanson, the Paris executioner. Now those are memoirs!’

‘The Parisian executioner?’

‘Yes. Sanson guillotined Charlotte Corday and slapped her cheeks, and the cheeks of the severed head blushed. One other thing: they used to give parties that they called the Victims’ Ball. Do we have that kind of ball?’

‘The Victims’ Ball had nothing to do with the Thermidor Period; it was part of the Post-Thermidor Period. Sanson’s notes are a forgery.’

‘What’s the difference if they’re a forgery or not? Either there was such a book or there wasn’t. Let’s have some rum. I’ve tried a lot of drinks in my time, but there’s nothing like rum. Rum. Jamaican rum.’

Fleming’s wife prepared dinner – mountains of greasy food that was almost instantly devoured by the voracious Fleming. An insatiable gluttony remained for ever a part of Fleming, just as thousands of other former convicts retained their psychic traumas for the rest of their lives.

The conversation somehow broke off in the early city twilight. I could hear next to me the familiar Kolyma chomping and slurping. I thought of life's strength – hidden in a healthy stomach and bowels that were capable of digesting large quantities. That had been Fleming's defensive reflex against Kolyma – an omnivorous greed. A lack of spiritual fastidiousness acquired behind the desk of a political investigator had also served to prepare him and cushion the shock of his Kolyma fall. As he fell, he perceived no abyss, for he had known all this even earlier and the knowledge saved him by weakening his moral torments, if such torments had even existed. Fleming experienced no additional spiritual traumas; he witnessed the worst and indifferently watched those next to him perish. Prepared to struggle only for his own life, he saved that life, but in his soul there remained a dark footprint that had to be obliterated, purged with penitence. His penitence was a slip of the tongue, a half-hint, a conversation aloud with himself – without regret or condemnation. 'The cards just didn't fall my way.' Nevertheless Fleming's story was an act of penitence.

'You see this?' he asked me.

'Your party membership card?'

'Right. It's brand new! But it wasn't simple, not at all simple. Six months ago the District Party Committee examined the question of taking me back into the party. They all sat around, read the materials. The secretary of the committee, a Chuvash, announced the decision in a flat way, almost rudely:

' "Well, it's a clear situation. Write up a resolution: reinstatement with an interruption in membership."

'It was as if they threw hot coals on me: "with an interruption in membership." My first thought was that if I didn't immediately declare I was in disagreement with the resolution, they'd always ask afterward why I was silent when my case was being examined. I mean, that's why you're called in, so you can speak your piece in time, tell them… I raised my hand.

' "Whad'ya want?" That same rudeness.

'I said: "I disagree with the resolution. I won't be able to get a job anywhere without being asked to explain the interruption."

' "You're a quick one," the first secretary of the Party District Committee said. "You're so pushy because you're not hurting for money. How much is your pension?"

‘He was right, but I interrupted him and said that I asked for total reinstatement with no interruption in membership.

‘And he said: “Why are you pushing and getting all worked up? You’re in blood up to your elbows!”

‘There was a roaring in my head. “How about you,” I said. “Aren’t your hands in blood?”

‘The first secretary said: “This meeting is cancelled.”

‘ “And back then, in ’37,” I said, “didn’t you bloody your hands then?”

‘The first secretary said: “Enough of this running off at the mouth. We can vote again. Get out of here.”

‘I went out into the corridor and they brought me the resolution: “reinstatement in the party denied.”

‘I ran around Moscow like a crazy man, filling out forms, writing letters. The resolution was cancelled. But the original formulation stayed: “reinstatement with interruption of membership.”

‘The person who reported my situation at the Party Control Commission said I should have kept my mouth shut at the District Committee Meeting. I’m still working at it, filling out forms, going to Moscow, filing legal suits. Have a drink.’

‘I don’t drink,’ I replied.

‘This isn’t rum, it’s cognac. Five-star cognac! For you.’

‘Take the bottle away.’

‘I’ll do just that, carry it away, take it with me. You won’t be offended?’

‘Not in the least.’

A year after this Leningrad supper I received a last letter from the used-book dealer: ‘My wife died suddenly while I was away from Leningrad. I arrived six months later and saw her grave and a snapshot of her in the coffin. Don’t condemn me for my weakness; I have all my wits about me, but I can’t get anything done. I live as if in a dream and have lost all interest in life. I know this will pass, but I need time. What did she see in her life? Dragged herself from one prison to another with packages and legal certificates. Social contempt, the trip to be with me in Magadan, a life of poverty, and now this – the end. Forgive me, I’ll write more later. Yes, I’m in good health, but is the society I live in healthy? All the best.’

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# *Lend-Lease*

The fresh tractor prints in the marsh were tracks of some prehistoric beast that bore little resemblance to an article of American technology delivered under the terms of Lend-Lease.

We convicts had heard of these gifts from beyond the sea and the emotional confusion they had introduced into the minds of the camp bigwigs. Worn knit suits and second-hand pullovers collected for the convicts of Kolyma were snapped up in near-fistfights by the wives of the Magadan generals.

As for the magical jars of sausage sent by Lend-Lease, we saw them only at a distance. What we knew and knew well were the chubby tins of Spam. Counted, measured by a very complex table of replacement, stolen by the greedy hands of the camp authorities, counted again and measured a second time before introduction to the kettle, boiled there till transformed into mysterious fibers that smelled like anything in the world except meat – this Spam excited the eye, but not the taste buds. Once tossed in the pot, Spam from Lend-Lease had no taste at all. Convict stomachs preferred something domestic such as old, rotten venison that couldn't be boiled down even in seven camp kettles. Venison doesn't disappear, doesn't become ephemeral like Spam.

Oatmeal from Lend-Lease we relished, but we never got more than two tablespoons per portion.

But the fruits of technology also came from Lend-Lease – fruits that could not be eaten: clumsy tomahawk-like hatchets, handy shovels with un-Russian work-saving handles. The shovel blades were instantaneously affixed to long Russian handles and flattened to make them more capacious.

Barrels of glycerin! Glycerin! The guard dipped out a bucketful with a kitchen pot on the very first night and got rich selling it to the convicts as

‘American honey’.

From Lend-Lease also came enormous black fifty-ton Diamond trucks with trailers and iron sides and five-ton Studebakers that could easily manage any hill. There were no better trucks in all of Kolyma. Day and night, Studebakers and Diamonds hauled American wheat along the thousand-mile road. The wheat was in pretty white linen sacks stamped with the American eagle, and chubby, tasteless bread rations were baked from this flour. Bread from Lend-Lease flour possessed an amazing quality: anyone who ate it stopped visiting the toilet; once in five days a bowel movement would be produced that wasn’t even worth the name. The stomach and intestines of the convict absorbed without remainder this magnificent white bread with its mixture of corn, bone-meal, and something else in addition – perhaps hope. And the time has not yet come to count the lives saved by this wheat from beyond the sea.

The Studebakers and Diamonds ate a lot of gas, but the gas also came from Lend-Lease, a light aviation gas. Russian trucks were adapted to be heated with wood: two stoves set near the motor were heated with split logs. There arose several wood supply centers headed by party members working on contract. Technical leadership at these wood supply centers was provided by a chief engineer, a plain engineer, a rate setter, a planner, and bookkeepers. I don’t remember whether two or three laborers ran the circular saw at the wood-processing plant. There may have been as many as three. The equipment was from Lend-Lease, and when a tractor came to the camp, a new word appeared in our language: ‘bulldozer’.

The prehistoric beast was freed from its chain: an American bulldozer with caterpillar tracks and a wide blade. The vertical metal shield gleamed like a mirror reflecting the sky, the trees, the stars, and the dirty faces of the convicts. Even the guard walked up to the foreign monster and said a man could shave himself before such a mirror. But there was no shaving for us; even the thought couldn’t have entered our heads.

The sighs and groans of the new American beast could be heard for a long time in the frosty air. The bulldozer coughed angrily in the frost, puffed, and then suddenly roared and moved boldly forward, crushing the shrubbery and passing easily over the stumps; this then was the help from beyond the sea.

Everywhere on the slope of the mountain were scattered construction-quality logs and firewood. Now we would not have the unbearable task of

hauling and stacking the iron logs of Daurian larch by hand. To drag the logs over the shrubbery, down the narrow paths of the mountain slope, was an impossible job. Before 1938 they used to send horses for the job, but horses could not tolerate the north as well as people, were weaker than people, died under the strain of the hauling. Now the vertical knife of the foreign bulldozer had come to help us (us?).

None of us ever imagined that we would be given some light work instead of the unendurable log-hauling that was hated by all. They would simply increase our norms and we would be forced to do something else – just as degrading and contemptible as any camp labor. Our frostbitten toes and fingers would not be cured by the American bulldozer. But there was the American machine grease! Ah yes, the machine grease! The barrel was immediately attacked by a crowd of starving men who knocked out the bottom right on the spot with a stone.

In their hunger, they claimed the machine grease was butter sent by Lend-Lease and there remained less than half a barrel by the time a sentry was sent to guard it and the camp administration drove off the crowd of starving, exhausted men with rifle-shots. The fortunate ones gulped down this Lend-Lease butter, not believing it was simply machine grease. After all, the healing American bread was also tasteless and also had that same metallic flavor. And everyone who had been lucky enough to touch the grease licked his fingers hours later, gulping down the minutest amounts of the foreign joy that tasted like young stone. After all, a stone is not born a stone, but a soft oily creature. A creature, and not a thing. A stone becomes a thing in old age. Young wet limestone tuffs in the mountains enchanted the eyes of escaped convicts and workers from the geological surveys. A man had to exert his will to tear himself away from these honeyed shores, these milky rivers of flowing young stone. But that was a mountain, a valley, stone; and this was a delivery from Lend-Lease, the creation of human hands…

Nothing terrible happened to those who had dipped their hands into the barrel. Trained in Kolyma, stomach and bowels proved themselves capable of coping with machine grease. A sentry was placed to guard the remainder, for this was food for machines – creatures infinitely more important to the state than people.

And thus from beyond the ocean there had arrived one of those creatures as a symbol of victory, friendship, and something else.

Three hundred men felt boundless envy toward the prisoner sitting at the wheel of the American tractor – Grinka Lebedev. There were better tractor operators than Lebedev among the convicts, but they had all been convicted according to Article 58 of the Criminal Code (political prisoners). Grinka Lebedev was a common criminal, a parricide to be precise. Each of the three hundred witnessed his earthly joy: to roar over to the logging area sitting at the wheel of a well-lubricated tractor.

The logging area kept moving back. Felling the taller trees suitable for building materials in Kolyma takes place along the stream banks where deep ravines force the trees to reach upward from their wind-protected havens toward the sun. In windy spots, in bright light, on marshy mountain slopes stand dwarfs – broken, twisted, tormented from eternally turning after the sun, from their constant struggle for a piece of thawed ground. The trees on the mountain slopes don't look like trees, but like monsters fit for a sideshow. Felling trees is similar to mining gold in those same streams in that it is just as rushed: the stream, the pan, the launder, the temporary barracks, the hurried predatory leap that leaves the stream and area without forest for three hundred years and without gold – for ever.

Somewhere there exists the science of forestry, but what kind of forestry can there be in a three-hundred-year-old larch forest in Kolyma during the war when the response to Lend-Lease is a hurried plunge into gold fever, harnessed, to be sure, by the guard towers of the 'zones'?

Many tall trees and even prepared, sectioned fire-logs were abandoned. Many thick-ended logs disappeared into the snow, falling to the ground as soon as they had been hoisted on to the sharp, brittle shoulders of the prisoners. Weak prisoner hands, tens of hands cannot lift on to a shoulder (there exists no such shoulder!) a two-meter log, drag its iron weight for tens of meters over shrubs, potholes, and pits. Many logs had been abandoned because of the impossibility of the job, and the bulldozer was supposed to help us.

But for its first trip in the land of Kolyma, on Russian land, it had been assigned a totally different job.

We watched the chugging bulldozer turn to the left and begin to climb the terrace to where there was a projection of rock and where we had been taken to work hundreds of times along the old road that led past the camp cemetery.

I hadn’t given any thought to why we were led to work for the last few weeks along a new road instead of the familiar path indented from the boot-heels of the guards and the thick rubber galoshes of the prisoners. The new road was twice as long as the old one. Everywhere there were hills and drop-offs, and we exhausted ourselves just getting to the job. But no one asked why we were being taken by a new path.

That was the way it had to be; that was the order; and we crawled on all fours, grabbing at stones that ripped open the skin of the fingers till the blood ran.

Only now did I see and understand the reason for all of this, and I thank God that He gave me the time and strength to witness it.

The logging area was just ahead, the slope of the mountain had been laid bare, and the shallow snow had been blown away by the wind. The stumps had all been rooted out; a charge of ammonal was placed under the larger ones, and the stump would fly into the air. Smaller stumps were uprooted with long bars. The smallest were simply pulled out by hand like the shrubs of dwarf cedar…

The mountain had been laid bare and transformed into a gigantic stage for a camp mystery play.

A grave, a mass prisoner grave, a stone pit stuffed full with undecaying corpses from 1938 was sliding down the side of the hill, revealing the secret of Kolyma.

In Kolyma, bodies are not given over to earth, but to stone. Stone keeps secrets and reveals them. The permafrost keeps and reveals secrets. All of our loved ones who died in Kolyma, all those who were shot, beaten to death, sucked dry by starvation, can still be recognized even after tens of years. There were no gas furnaces in Kolyma. The corpses wait in stone, in the permafrost.

In 1938 entire work gangs dug such graves, constantly drilling, exploding, deepening the enormous gray, hard, cold stone pits. Digging graves in 1938 was easy work; there was no ‘assignment’, no ‘norm’ calculated to kill a man with a fourteen-hour working day. It was easier to dig graves than to stand in rubber galoshes over bare feet in the icy waters where they mined gold – the ‘basic unit of production’, the ‘first of all metals’.

These graves, enormous stone pits, were filled to the brim with corpses. The bodies had not decayed; they were just bare skeletons over which

stretched dirty, scratched skin bitten all over by lice.

The north resisted with all its strength this work of man, not accepting the corpses into its bowels. Defeated, humbled, retreating, stone promised to forget nothing, to wait and preserve its secret. The severe winters, the hot summers, the winds, the six years of rain had not wrenched the dead men from the stone. The earth opened, baring its subterranean storerooms, for they contained not only gold and lead, tungsten and uranium, but also undecaying human bodies.

These human bodies slid down the slope, perhaps attempting to arise. From a distance, from the other side of the creek, I had previously seen these moving objects that caught up against branches and stones; I had seen them through the few trees still left standing and I thought that they were logs that had not yet been hauled away.

Now the mountain was laid bare, and its secret was revealed. The grave ‘opened’, and the dead men slid down the stony slope. Near the tractor road an enormous new common grave was dug. Who had dug it? No one was taken from the barracks for this work. It was enormous, and I and my companions knew that if we were to freeze and die, place would be found for us in this new grave, this house-warming for dead men.

The bulldozer scraped up the frozen bodies, thousands of bodies of thousands of skeleton-like corpses. Nothing had decayed: the twisted fingers, the pus-filled toes which were reduced to mere stumps after frostbite, the dry skin scratched bloody and eyes burning with a hungry gleam.

With my exhausted, tormented mind I tried to understand: how did there come to be such an enormous grave in this area? I am an old resident of Kolyma, and there hadn’t been any gold-mine here as far as I knew. But then I realized that I knew only a fragment of that world surrounded by a barbed-wire zone and guard towers that reminded one of the pages of tent-like Moscow architecture. Moscow’s taller buildings are guard towers keeping watch over the city’s prisoners. That’s what those buildings look like. And what served as models for Moscow architecture – the watchful towers of the Moscow Kremlin or the guard towers of the camps? The guard towers of the camp ‘zone’ represent the main concept advanced by their time and brilliantly expressed in the symbolism of architecture.

I realized that I knew only a small bit of that world, a pitifully small part, that twenty kilometers away there might be a shack for geological explorers

looking for uranium or a gold-mine with thirty thousand prisoners. Much can be hidden in the folds of the mountain.

And then I remembered the greedy blaze of the fireweed, the furious blossoming of the taiga in summer when it tried to hide in the grass and foliage any deed of man – good or bad. And if I forget, the grass will forget. But the permafrost and stone will not forget.

Grinka Lebedev, parricide, was a good tractor-driver, and he controlled the well-oiled foreign tractor with ease. Grinka Lebedev carefully carried out his job, scooping the corpses toward the grave with the gleaming bulldozer knife-shield, pushing them into the pit and returning to drag up more.

The camp administration had decided that the first job for the bulldozer received from Lend-Lease should not be work in the forest, but something far more important.

The work was finished. The bulldozer heaped a mound of stones and gravel on the new grave, and the corpses were hidden under stone. But they did not disappear.

The bulldozer approached us. Grinka Lebedev, common criminal and parricide, did not look at us, prisoners of Article 58. Grinka had been entrusted with a task by the government, and he had fulfilled that task. On the stone face of Grinka Lebedev were hewn pride and a sense of having accomplished his duty.

The bulldozer roared past us; on the mirror-like blade there was no scratch, not a single spot.

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# *Sententious*

*Dedicated to Nadezhda Mandelshtam*

People materialized out of nowhere – one after another. A stranger would lie down next to me on my berth and nestle against my bony shoulder in the night, giving me his pitiful warmth and receiving my own in exchange. There were nights when no warmth at all penetrated the rags of my pea jacket and padded vest, and in the morning I would think my neighbor was dead and be surprised that he would rise in response to a shouted command, get dressed, and submissively obey the order. I had little warmth. Little flesh was left on my bones, just enough for bitterness – the last human emotion; it was closer to the bone. The man who had appeared from nowhere would disappear for ever in the day, for there were many work areas for coal-prospecting. I didn't know the people who slept at my side. I never asked them questions. There is an Arab saying: 'He who asks no questions will be told no lies.' That wasn't the case here. I couldn't have cared less if I was being told lies or the truth. The camp criminals have a cruel saying which is even more appropriate here – it expresses a deep contempt for the questioner: 'If you don't believe it, take it as a fairy tale.' I neither asked questions nor listened to fairy tales.

What remained with me till the very end? Bitterness. And I expected this bitterness to stay with me till death. But death, just recently so near, began to ease away little by little. Death was replaced not by life, but by semi-consciousness, an existence which had no formula and could not be called life. Each day, each sunrise brought with it the danger of some new lurch into death. But it never happened. I had the easiest of jobs, easier even than being a watchman – I chopped wood to boil water. They could have kicked me out, but where to? The taiga is a distant thing, and our little village was like an island in the world of the taiga. I could barely lift my feet, the two

hundred yards from the tent to the work area seemed endless, and to cover it I had to rest more than once. Even now I clearly remember all the ruts and potholes on that path of death. And I remember the creek on whose bank I would lie on my stomach to lap up the cold, delicious water. The two-handed saw that I sometimes carried on my shoulder and sometimes dragged behind me seemed unbelievably heavy.

I never did manage to boil water in time for dinner. But none of the workers (all of them had been convicts just yesterday) ever noticed if the water was boiling or not. Kolyma had taught all of us to distinguish only hot water from cold, raw water.

We were totally indifferent about the dialectic leap of quantity into quality. We weren't philosophers but workers, and our hot drinking-water betrayed none of the important qualities of this leap.

I ate, indifferently stuffing into my mouth anything that seemed edible – scraps, last year's marsh berries.

There were two shotguns in our tent. Grouse were not afraid of people and at first they could be shot from the tent threshold itself. Game was either roasted whole in the ashes of the campfire or it was boiled. Down for pillows was a sure source of income for the free masters of guns and forest birds. Cleaned and plucked, the birds were boiled in three-quart tin cans suspended over the campfire. I never found any remnants of these magic birds. The hungry teeth of free men ground each bone to nothing. This was another miracle of the taiga.

I never tried a piece of grouse. Mine were the berries, the roots of the grass, the rations. And I didn't die. With increasing indifference and without bitterness I began to watch the cold red sun, the bare mountaintops where the rocks, the turns of the river, the trees were all sharp and unfriendly. In the evenings a cold fog rose from the river, and there was no single hour in the taiga day when I felt warm.

My frostbitten fingers and toes ached, hummed from the pain. The bright skin of the fingers remained rosy and sensitive. I kept my fingers wrapped in any kind of dirty rag to protect them from a new wound, from pain, but not from infection. Pus seeped endlessly from both my big toes.

I was awakened by a hammer-blow on the rail, and a blow on the rails also marked the end of the day. After supper I would immediately lie down on my bunk without undressing and, naturally, fall asleep. I perceived the tent in which I lived as if through a fog; people moved back and forth, loud

swearing could be heard, there were fights interrupted by sudden silence before a dangerous blow. Fights died down quickly of their own accord. No one held anyone back, no one separated anyone. The motor of aggression simply died out, and there ensued the cold silence of night with a pale tall sky peering through the holes of the canvas, and all around were groans, snoring, wheezing, coughing, and the mindless swearing of sleeping men.

Once at night I suddenly realized that I heard groans and wheezing. The sensation was as sudden as the dawn and did not gladden me. Later, as I recollected this moment of amazement, I understood that the need for sleep, forgetfulness, unconsciousness had lessened. I'd 'woken up', as Moses Kuznetsov used to say. He was a blacksmith and a clever, intelligent man.

There appeared an insistent pain in the muscles. I can't imagine what sort of muscles I could have had, but they did ache and enrage me by not letting me forget about my body. Then something else appeared – something different from resentment and bitterness. There appeared indifference and fearlessness. I realized I didn't care if I was to be beaten or not, given dinner and the daily ration or not. The prospecting group was not guarded, so there was no one to beat me as in the mines. Nevertheless, I remembered the mine and measured my courage by its rule. This indifference and lack of fear cast a sort of bridge over to death. The realization that there would be no beatings here, that they didn't beat you here, gave birth to new feelings, new strength.

Later came fear, not a strong fear, but nevertheless a fear of losing the salvation of this life and work, of losing the tall cold sky and the aching pain in worn-out muscles. I realized I was afraid of leaving here for the mines. I was afraid and that was all there was to it. I had never striven to improve my life if I was content with it. The flesh on my bones grew every day. Envy was the name of the next feeling that returned to me. I envied my dead friends who had died in '38. I envied those of my neighbors who had something to chew or smoke. I didn't envy the camp chief, the foreman, the work brigade leader; that was a different world altogether.

Love didn't return to me. Oh, how distant is love from envy, from fear, from bitterness. How little people need love. Love comes only when all other human emotions have already returned. Love comes last, returns last. Or does it return? Indifference, envy, and fear, however, were not the only witnesses of my return to life. Pity for animals returned earlier than pity for people.

As the weakest in this world of excavations and exploratory ditches, I worked with the topographer, dragging his rod and theodolite. Sometimes, to be able to move faster, the topographer would strap the theodolite to his own back and leave me with only the light rod painted all over with numbers. The topographer was a former convict himself. That summer there were a number of escaped convicts in the taiga, and the topographer asked for and received a small-caliber rifle from the camp authorities. But the rifle only interfered with our work. And not just because it was an extra thing to carry in our difficult travels. Once we sat down to rest, and the topographer took aim at a red-breasted bullfinch that had flown up to look us over and lure us away from the nest. If necessary, the bird was ready to sacrifice its life. The female must have been sitting on eggs somewhere near for him to have been so insanely bold. The topographer threw up the rifle, but I pushed the barrel away.

‘Put away the gun!’

‘What’s the matter with you? Are you crazy?’

‘Leave the bird alone.’

‘I’ll report this to the chief.’

‘The hell with your chief.’

But the topographer didn’t want to quarrel and didn’t report the incident. I realized that something important had returned to me.

I hadn’t seen newspapers or books for years, and I had long since trained myself not to regret the loss. All fifty-five of my neighbors in the torn tarpaulin tent felt the same way. There was no book or newspaper in our barracks. The camp authorities – the foreman, the chief of prospecting, the superintendent – had descended into our world without books.

My language was the crude language of the mines and it was as impoverished as the emotions that lived near the bones. Get up, go to work, dinner, end of work, rest, citizen chief, may I speak, shovel, trench, yes sir, drill, pick, it’s cold outside, rain, cold soup, hot soup, bread, ration, leave me the butt – these few dozen words were all I had needed for years. Half of them were obscenities. The wealth of Russian profanity, its inexhaustible offensiveness, was not revealed to me either in my childhood or in my youth. But I did not seek other words. I was happy that I did not have to search for other words. I didn’t even know if they existed. I couldn’t have answered that question.

I was frightened, shaken when there appeared in my brain (I clearly remember that it was in the back of the skull) a word totally inappropriate for the taiga, a word which I didn't myself understand, not to mention my comrades. I shouted out the word:

'Sententious! Sententious!'

I roared with laughter.

'Sententious!' I shouted directly into the northern sky, into the double dawn, still not understanding the meaning of the word that had been born within me. And if the word had returned, then all the better! A great joy filled me.

'Sententious!'

'Idiot!'

'He really is! What are you, a foreigner or something?' The question was asked ironically by Vronsky. The very same Vronsky, the mountain engineer. Three shreds.

'Vronsky, give me a smoke.'

'Can't, haven't got anything.'

'Just three shreds of tobacco.'

'Three shreds? OK.'

From a tobacco-pouch stuffed with home-made tobacco a dirty fingernail extracted three shreds of tobacco.

'A foreigner?' The question shifted our fate into the world of provocations and denunciations, investigations and lengthened sentences.

But I couldn't care less about Vronsky's question. The find was enormous.

Bitterness was the last feeling with which man departed into non-being, into the world of the dead. But was it dead? Even a stone didn't seem dead to me, not to mention the grass, the trees, the river. The river was not only the incarnation of life, not just a symbol of life, but life itself. It possessed eternal movement, calm, a silent and secret language of its own, its business that forced it to run downhill against the wind, beating its way through the rocks, crossing the steppes, the meadows. The river changed its bed, leaving it dried by the sun, and in a barely visible watery thread made its way along the rocks, faithful to its eternal duty. It was a stream that had lost hope for help from heaven – a saving rain, but with the first rain, the water changed its shores, broke rocks, cast huge trees in the air and rushed madly down that same eternal road…

Sententious! I couldn’t believe myself and was afraid when I went to sleep that I would forget the word that had newly returned to me. But the word didn’t disappear.

For a week I didn’t understand what the word meant. I whispered it, amused and frightened my neighbors with it. I wanted an explanation, a definition, a translation…

Many days passed before I learned to call forth from the depth of memory new words, one after the other. Each came with difficulty; each appeared suddenly and separately. Thoughts and words didn’t return in streams. Each returned alone, unaccompanied by the watchful guards of familiar words. Each appeared first on the tongue and only later in the mind.

And then came the day when everyone, all fifty workers, dropped their work and ran to the village, to the river, climbing out of their ditches, abandoning half-sawn-through trees and the uncooked soup in the pot. They all ran quicker than me, but I hobbled up in time, aiding myself in this downhill run with my hands.

The chief had arrived from Magadan. The day was clear, hot, dry. On an enormous fir stump stood a record-player. Overcoming the hiss of the needle, it was playing symphonic music.

And everyone stood around – murderers and horse-thieves, common criminals and political prisoners, foremen and workers. And the chief stood there too. And the expression on his face was such that he seemed to have written the music for us, for our desolate sojourn in the taiga. The shellacked record spun and hissed, and the stump itself, wound up in three hundred circles over the past three hundred years, spun like a taut spring…

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# *The Virtuoso Shovelman*

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# *The Seizure*

The wall lurched, and nausea welled up in my throat, sickeningly sweet. For the thousandth time a burned-out match floated past me. I stretched out my hand to grab the annoying match, and it disappeared. Sight had left me. But the world had not yet abandoned me – I could still hear the far-off, insistent voice of the nurse somewhere out on the street. Then hospital gowns, the corner of a building, and the starry sky flashed by… An enormous gray turtle with a cold gleam in its eyes rose up before me. Someone had broken a hole through its ribs, and I crawled into the hole, clutching and pulling myself up with my hands. I trusted only my hands.

I remembered someone's insistent fingers skillfully easing my head and shoulders on to the bed. Everything fell quiet, and I was alone with someone as enormous as Gulliver. Insect-like, I lay on a board, and someone examined me intently through a magnifying glass. I squirmed, but the terrible glass followed all my movements. Only when the orderlies had transferred me to a hospital cot and the blissful calm of solitude had followed did I realize that Gulliver's magnifying glass had not been a nightmare – I had been looking at the on-duty doctor's glasses. This pleased me.

My head ached and whirled at the slightest movement, and it was impossible to think. I could only remember, and remote frightening pictures began to appear in black and white like scenes from a silent movie. The cloying nausea so similar to the effect of ether would not go away. I had experienced that sensation before… I recalled how, many years before, in the far north, a day off had been declared for the first time in six months. Everybody wanted to lie down, simply to lie prone, not to mend clothing, not to move… But everyone was awakened early in the morning and sent for firewood. Five miles from the village was a forest-cutting area, and we

were each to select a log commensurate with our strength and drag it home to the barracks. I decided to go off in a different direction to a place a little more than a mile away where there were some old log stacks and where I could find a log I could handle. Climbing the mountain was exhausting, and when I reached the stack, I couldn’t find a light log. Higher up I could see collapsed stacks of black logs, and I started to make my way up to them. There was only one log there that was slender enough for me to carry, but one end of it was pinned under the stack, and I didn’t have the strength to pull it free.

After several attempts I became totally exhausted. Since it was impossible to return empty-handed, however, I gathered my strength and crawled still higher to a stack covered with snow. It took me a long time to clear away the loose, squeaky snow with my hands and feet. I finally managed to yank a log free, but it was too heavy.

I wore a dirty towel around my neck that served as a scarf. I unwound it, tied it to the tip of the log, and started dragging the log away. The log slid downhill, banging against trees, bumps, and my legs, sometimes even getting away from me. Octopus-like, the dwarf cedar grasped at the log, but it would tear itself free from the tree’s black tentacles, gather speed, and then get stuck in the snow. I would crawl down to it and again force it to move. While I was still high up on the mountain, it became dark, and I realized that many hours had passed, and the road back to the village and the camp area was still far away. I yanked at the scarf, and the log again hurtled downward in jerks. I dragged the log out on to the road. The forest lurched before my eyes, and a sickening sweet nausea welled up from my throat. I came to in the crane-operator’s shed; he was rubbing my face and hands with stinging snow.

All this I saw projected once again on the hospital wall.

But instead of the crane-operator, a doctor was holding my hand.

‘Where am I?’

‘In the Neurological Institute.’

The doctor asked me something, and I answered with difficulty. I was not afraid of memories.

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# *An Epitaph*

They all died…

My friend, Nicholas Kazimirovich Barbe, who helped me drag a large stone from a narrow test pit, was shot for not fulfilling the plan in the sector assigned to this work gang. He was the foreman listed in the report of the young communist Arm, who received a medal in 1938 and later became mine chief and then director of mines. Arm made a splendid career for himself. Nicholas Barbe possessed one treasured object, a camel-hair scarf – a long, warm, blue scarf of real wool. Thieves stole it in the bathhouse. Barbe was looking the other way, and they simply took it. And that was that. The next day Barbe's cheeks were frostbitten, severely frostbitten – so much so that the sores didn't have time to heal before his death…

Ioska Riutin died. He was my partner. None of the hard workers wanted to work with me, but Ioska did. He was stronger and more agile than I, but he understood perfectly why we had been brought here. And he wasn't offended at me for being a bad worker. Ultimately the 'senior inspector' (a czarist term still in use in 1937) ordered that I be given individual assignments. So Ioska worked with someone else, but our bunks in the barracks were side by side. One night I was awakened by the awkward movement of someone dressed in leather and smelling of sheep. Standing in the narrow passageway between the bunks, the man was waking my neighbor.

'Riutin! Get up.'

Hurriedly, Ioska began to dress, while the man who smelled of sheep searched his few belongings. Among them was a chess set, and the leather-clad man set it aside.

'That's mine,' Riutin said. 'That's my property. I paid money for it.'

'So what?' the sheepskin coat said.

‘Put it back.’

The sheepskin coat burst out laughing. And when he tired of laughing, he wiped his face with his leather sleeve and said:

‘You won’t be needing it any more…’

Dmitri Nikolaevich Orlov, a former adviser of Kirov,* died. He and I sawed wood together during the night shift at the mine. The possessors of a saw, we worked at the bakery during the day. I remember perfectly the toolman’s critical gaze as he issued us the saw – an ordinary cross-cut saw.

‘Listen, old man,’ the toolman said. They called all of us ‘old men’ back then; we didn’t have to wait twenty years for that title. ‘Can you sharpen a saw?’

‘Of course,’ Orlov said quickly. ‘Do you have a tooth setter?’

‘You can use an axe,’ the toolman said, having come to the conclusion that we were intelligent people – not like all those eggheads.

The economist Semyon Alekseevich Sheinin died. He was my partner and a good person. For a long time he could not grasp what they were doing to us, but he finally came to understand the situation and quietly began to wait for death. He did not lack courage. Once I received a package. The fact that the package had arrived was a rare event. There was nothing in it but an aviator’s felt boots. That was it. How little our families knew of the conditions in which we lived! I was perfectly aware that the boots would be stolen on the very first night. So, without leaving the commandant’s office, I sold them for a hundred rubles to Andrei Boiko. The boots were worth 700, but it was a profitable sale anyway. After all, I could buy more than 200 pounds of bread for that amount, or maybe some butter and sugar. I had not eaten butter and sugar since I had arrived in prison. I bought more than two pounds of butter at the commissary. I remember how nutritious it was. That butter cost me forty-one rubles. I bought it during the day (I worked at night) and ran for Sheinin, who lived in a different barracks, to celebrate the arrival of the package. I bought bread too…

Semyon Alekseevich was flustered and happy.

‘But why me? What right do I have?’ he kept repeating in a state of nervous excitement. ‘No, no, I can’t…’ But I persuaded him, and he ran joyfully for boiling water.

And I was immediately knocked to the ground by a terrible blow on the head.

When I regained consciousness, the bag with the bread and butter was gone. The larch log that had been used to strike me lay next to the cot, and everyone was laughing. Sheinin came running with the boiling water. For many years after that I could not remember the theft without getting terribly upset. As for Semyon Alekseevich, he died.

Ivan Yakovlevich Fediaxin died. He and I had arrived in Kolyma by the same train and boat. We ended up in the same mine, in the same work gang. A peasant from Volokolamsk and a philosopher, he had organized the first collective farm in Russia. The collective farms, as is well known, were first organized by the Socialist Revolutionaries in the twenties. The Chayanov-Kondratiev group represented their interests in the government. Ivan Yakovlevich was a Socialist Revolutionary – one of the million who voted for the party of 1917. He was sentenced to five years for organizing the first kolkhoz.

Once in the early Kolyma fall of 1937 he and I were filling a cart on the famous mine conveyor. There were two carts which could be unhitched alternately while the horse-driver was hauling the other to the washer. Two men could barely manage to keep up with the job. There was no time to smoke, and anyway it wasn't permitted by the overseers. But our horse-driver smoked – an enormous cigar rolled from almost a half-package of home-grown tobacco (there was still tobacco back then), and he would leave it on the edge of the mine for us to smoke as well.

The horse-driver was Mishka Vavilov, former vice-president of the 'Industrial Imports Trust'.

We talked to each other as we tossed earth casually into the cart. I told Fediaxin about the amount of earth demanded from exiled Decembrists in Nerchinsk as told in *The Notes of Maria Volkonskaya*. They used an old Russian unit of measure back then, the *pood*, which was thirty-six pounds. Each man had to produce three *pood* per day. 'So how much does our quota come to?' Fediaxin asked.

I calculated – approximately eight hundred *poods*.

'So that's how much quotas have increased…'

Later, in the winter, when we were constantly hungry, I would get tobacco, begging, saving, and buying it, and trade it for bread. Fediaxin disapproved of my 'business'.

'That's not worthy of you; you shouldn't do that.'

I saw him for the last time in the cafeteria. It was winter. I gave him six dinner coupons that I had earned that night for copying some office documents out by hand. Good handwriting helped me out sometimes. The coupons would have been worthless the next day, since dates were stamped on them. Fediaxin picked up the dinners, sat down at the table, and poured the watery soup (which contained not a single grease spot) from one bowl into another. All six portions of the pearl-barley kasha weren't enough to fill one bowl. Fediaxin had no spoon, so he licked up the kasha with his tongue. And he cried.

Derfelle died. He was a French communist who had served time in the stone quarries of Cayenne. Aside from hunger and cold, he was morally exhausted. He could not believe that he, a member of the Comintern, could end up at hard labor here in the Soviet Union. His horror would have been lessened if he could have seen that there were others here like him. Everyone with whom he had arrived, with whom he lived, with whom he died was like that. He was a small, weak person, and beatings were just becoming popular… Once the work-gang leader struck him, simply struck him with his fist – to keep him in line, so to speak – but Derfelle collapsed and did not get up. He was one of the first, the lucky ones to die. In Moscow he had worked as an editor at Tass. He had a good command of Russian. 'Back in Cayenne it was bad, too,' he told me once, 'but here it's very bad.'

Frits David died. He was a Dutch communist, an employee of the Comintern who was accused of espionage. He had beautiful wavy hair, deep-set blue eyes, and a childish line to his mouth. He knew almost no Russian. I met him in the barracks, which were so crowded that one could fall asleep standing up. We stood side by side. Frits smiled at me and closed his eyes.

The space beneath the bunks was so packed with people that we had to wait to sit down, to simply crouch and lean against another body, a post – and – fall asleep. I waited, covering my eyes. Suddenly something next to me collapsed. My neighbor, Frits David, had fallen. Embarrassed, he got up.

'I fell asleep,' he said in a frightened voice.

This Frits David was the first in our contingent to receive a package. His wife sent it to him from Moscow. In the package was a velvet suit, a

nightshirt, and a large photograph of a beautiful woman. He was wearing this velvet suit as he crouched next to me on the floor.

‘I want to eat,’ he said, smiling and blushing. ‘I really want to eat. Bring me something to eat.’

Frits David went mad and was taken away.

The nightshirt and the photograph were stolen on the very first night. When I told people about him later, I always experienced a feeling of indignation and could not understand why anyone would want a photograph of a stranger.

‘You don’t know everything,’ a certain clever acquaintance once explained to me. ‘It’s not hard to figure out. The photograph was stolen by the camp thugs for what they call a “showing”. For masturbation, my naïve friend…’

Seryozha Klivansky died. He and I had been freshmen together at the university, and we met twenty years later in a cell for transit prisoners in Butyr Prison. He had been expelled from the Young Communist League in 1927 for a report on the Chinese revolution that he gave to the Current Politics Club. He managed to graduate from the university, and he worked as an economist in Government Planning until the situation changed and he had to leave. He won a competition to join the orchestra of the Stanislavsky Theater, where he played second violin until his arrest in 1937. He was a sanguine type, sharp of wit and full of irony. He never lost his interest in life and its events.

It was so hot in the transit cell that everyone walked around nearly naked, pouring water on themselves and sleeping on the floor. Only heroes could bear to sleep on the bunks.

Klivansky maintained his sense of humor: ‘This is torture by steaming. Next they’ll torture by northern frost.’ This was a realistic prediction, not the whining of a coward.

At the mine, Seryozha was cheerful and talkative. Enthusiastically, he studied the camp thugs’ vocabulary and took a childlike delight in pronouncing phrases from the criminal world with the proper intonation.

He loved poetry and recited verse by heart while in prison. He stopped doing that in camp.

He would have shared his last morsel, or, rather, he was still at that stage… That is, he never reached the point where no one had a last morsel and no one shared anything with anyone.

The work-gang leader, Diukov, died. I don’t know and never knew his first name. He had been convicted of a petty crime that had nothing to do with Article 58, under which the political prisoners had been sentenced. In camps back on the mainland he had played the part of ‘club president’, and if his attitude toward life in the camps was not romanticized, he at least intended to ‘play the role’. He had arrived in the winter and had made an amazing speech at the very first meeting. The petty criminals and thieves with repeated offenses were considered friends of the people and were to be re-educated and not punished (in contrast to enemies of the people convicted under Article 58). Later, when repeating offenders were tried under Point 14 of Article 58 for ‘sabotage’ (refusing to work), all of Paragraph 14 was removed from Article 58, and such offenders were saved from a variety of punitive measures that could last for years. Repeating offenders were always considered ‘friends of the people’ right up to Beria’s famous amnesty of 1953. Hundreds of thousands of unhappy people were sacrificed to theory, the infamous concept of re-education, and Krylenko’s[*] sentences, which could be stretched out to any number of years.

At that first meeting Diukov offered to lead a work gang consisting exclusively of men convicted under Article 58. Usually the work-gang leader of the ‘politicals’ was one of them. Diukov was not a bad sort. He knew that peasants worked hard in the camps and remembered that there were a lot of peasants among those convicted under Article 58. This last circumstance was due to a certain wisdom in Yezhov and Beria, who understood that the intelligentsia’s value in terms of physical labor was not very high and that they might not be able to cope with camp production goals, as opposed to camp political goals. But Diukov did not concern himself with such lofty deliberations. Indeed, he never thought of anything other than his men’s capacity to work. He selected a work gang exclusively of peasants and started to work. That was in the spring of 1938. Diukov’s peasants survived the hungry winter of 1937–8. If he had ever seen his men naked in the bathhouse, he would immediately have realized what the problem was.

They worked badly and needed to be fed. But the camp authorities turned Diukov down flat on this point. The starving work gang exhausted itself heroically to fulfill its quotas. At that point everyone started to cheat Diukov: the men who measured production levels, the bookkeepers, the overseers, the foremen. He complained, protested more and more harshly,

but the production of the work gang continued to fall, and the food ration got smaller and smaller. Diukov attempted to take his case to higher authorities, but these higher authorities simply advised the proper persons to include Diukov's gang together with their leader in certain lists. This was done, and they were all shot at the famous Serpentine Mine.

Pavel Mixailovich Xvostov died. It was the conduct of these hungry people that was most terrible. Although they might seem normal, they were half mad. Hungry men will always defend justice furiously (if they are not too hungry or too exhausted). They argue incessantly and fight desperately. Under normal circumstances only one quarrel in a thousand will end in a fight. Hungry people fight constantly. Quarrels flare up over the most trivial and unexpected matters: 'What are you doing with my pick? Why did you take my place?' The shorter of two men tries to trip his opponent to bring him down. The taller man attempts to knock his enemy down by using his own weight advantage – and then scratch, beat, bite… All this occurs in a helpless fashion; it is neither painful nor fatal. Too often it's just to catch the attention of others. No one interferes with a fight.

Xvostov was precisely that sort of person. He fought with someone every day – either in the barracks or in the deep side trench that our work gang was digging. He was my *winter* acquaintance; I never saw his hair. He had a cap with torn earflaps of white fur. As for his eyes, they were dark, gleaming, hungry. Sometimes I would recite poetry, and he would look at me as if I were half mad.

Once, all of a sudden, he furiously began to attack the stone in the trench with his pick. The pick was heavy, but Xvostov kept swinging it hard and without interruption. This show of strength amazed me. We had been together for a long time and had been hungry for a long time. Then the pick fell to the earth with a ringing sound. I looked around. Xvostov stood with his legs apart, swaying. His knees began to crumple. He lurched and fell face down, his outstretched hands covered in those same mittens he mended every evening. His forearms were bared; both were tattooed. Pavel Mixailovich had been a sea captain.

Roman Romanovich died before my very eyes. At one time he had been a sort of 'regimental commander'. He distributed packages, was responsible for keeping the camp clean, and – in a word – enjoyed privileges that none of us 'fifty-eighters' could even dream of. The highest post we could hope to attain was work in the bathhouse laundry or patching clothes on the night

shift. ‘Special instructions’ from Moscow permitted us to come into contact only with stone. That little piece of paper was in each of our folders. But Roman Romanovich had been allotted this unattainable post. And he quickly learned all its secrets: how to open a crate containing a package for a prisoner and do it in such a way as to dump the sugar on the floor, how to break a jar of preserves, how to kick toasted bread and dried fruits under the counter. Roman Romanovich learned all this quickly and did not seek our company. He was primly official and behaved as the polite representative of those higher camp authorities, with whom we could have no personal contact. He never gave us any advice on any matter. He only explained: one letter could be sent per month, packages were distributed between eight and ten p.m. in the commandant’s office, etc.

Evidently some accidental acquaintanceship had played a role in his getting the job. But then he didn’t last long as regimental commander – only about two months. Either it was one of the usual personnel checks that took place from time to time and were obligatory at the end of the year, or someone turned him in – ‘blew’ on him, in the camp’s eloquent phrase. In any case, Roman Romanovich disappeared. He had been gathering dwarf-cedar needles, which were used as a source of vitamin C for convicts. Only real ‘goners’ were used for needle-picking. These starving semi-invalids were the by-products of the gold-mines, which transformed healthy people into invalids in three weeks by hunger, lack of sleep, long hours of heavy work, beatings. New people were ‘transferred’ to the work gang, and Moloch chewed on…

By the end of the season there was no one left in the work gang except its leader, Ivanov. The rest had been sent to the hospital to die or were used for needle-picking, where they were fed once a day and could not receive more than 600 grams of bread – a little more than a pound. Romanov and I worked together that fall picking needles. The needles were not only useless as a source of vitamin C but were even declared much later, in 1952, to be harmful to the kidneys.

We were also building a home for ourselves for the winter. In the summer we lived in ragged tents. We paced off the area, staked out the corners, and drove sticks into the ground at rather wide intervals to form a double-row fence. We packed the gaps with icy pieces of moss and peat. Inside were single-layer bunks made from poles. In the middle was a cast-iron stove. Each evening we received an empirically calculated portion of firewood.

Nevertheless, we had neither saw nor axe, since these objects were guarded by the soldiers who lived in a separate plywood shack. The reason for this was that some of the criminals in the neighboring work gang had attacked the gang leader. The criminal element has an extraordinary attraction to drama and introduces it into its own life in a way that would be the envy even of Evreinov.* The criminals decided to kill the work-gang leader, and the proposal to saw off his head was received ecstatically. They beheaded him with an ordinary cross-cut saw. That was why convicts were not allowed axes or saws at night. Why at night? No one made any attempt to find logic in camp orders.

How could logs be cut to fit the stove? The thin ones could be stamped on and broken, but the thicker ones had to be stuffed into the mouth of the stove – thin end first so they would gradually burn down. During the night there would always be someone to stuff them farther in. The light from the open stove door was the only light in our house. Drafts would sweep through the wall until the first snowfall, but then we shoveled snow all around the house and poured water over the snow, and our winter home was ready. The door opening was hung with a piece of tarpaulin.

It was here in this shed that I found Roman Romanovich. He didn't recognize me. The criminal camp has a very descriptive phrase to describe the way he was dressed – 'like fire'. Shreds of cotton wool protruded from his quilted jacket, his pants, his hat. Evidently Roman Romanovich often had occasion to run for a 'light' for the cigarette of this or that criminal… There was a hungry gleam in his eyes, but his cheeks were as rosy as before, except that now they didn't remind one of two balloons but clung rather tightly to his cheekbones. Roman Romanovich lay in the corner, wheezing loudly. His chin rose and fell.

'He's finished,' said Denisov, his neighbor. 'His foot rags are in good shape.' Agilely, Denisov pulled the boots off the dying man's feet and unwrapped the green footcloths that were still quite wearable. 'That's how it's done,' he said, peering at me in a threatening fashion. But I didn't care.

Romanov's corpse was carried out while we were lining up to be sent to work. He didn't have a hat either. The bottom of his coat dragged the ground.

Volodya Dobrovoltsev, the pointman, died. What is that – a job or a nationality? It was a job that was the envy of every 'fifty-eighter' in the barracks. (Separate barracks for the 'politicals' in a camp for petty

criminals and regular thugs were, of course, a legal mockery. Such arrangements protected no one from attacks or bloody settling of accounts by the criminals.)

The ‘point’ was an iron pipe with hot steam which was used to heat the stone and coarse frozen gravel. From time to time a worker would shovel out the heated stone with a ten-foot-long shovel that had a blade the size of a man’s palm.

This was considered a skilled job, since the pointman had to open and shut the valves which regulated hot steam that traveled along pipes from a primitive boiler in the shed. It was even better to be a pointman than a boilerman. Not every mechanical engineer could hope for that kind of work. And it wasn’t because any special skills were required. As far as Volodya was concerned, it was sheer chance that he got the job, but it transformed him totally. He no longer had to concern himself with the eternal preoccupation of how to keep warm. The icy cold did not penetrate his entire being, didn’t keep his mind from functioning. The hot pipe saved him. That was why everyone envied Dobrovoltsev.

There was talk that he didn’t get the job of pointman for nothing, that it was sure proof that he was an informer, a spy… Of course, the criminals would maintain that anyone who had worked as a camp orderly had drunk the working man’s blood, but people knew just how much such gossip was worth; envy is a poor adviser. Somehow Volodya’s stature increased immeasurably in our eyes. It was as if a remarkable violinist had appeared among us. Dobrovoltsev would leave camp alone – the conditions required that. He would leave through the guard’s booth, opening the tiny window and shouting his number – ‘twenty-five’ – in a joyous, loud voice. It had been a long time since we had heard anything like that.

Sometimes he would work near our work site, and we would make use of our acquaintance and would alternate running to the pipe to get warm. The pipe was an inch and a half in diameter, and you could wrap your fingers around it, squeeze them into a fist and feel the heat flow from your hands to your body so that it was impossible to tear yourself away to return to the mine face and the frost…

Volodya didn’t chase us away as the other pointmen did. He never said a word to us, although I know for a fact that pointmen were forbidden to let the likes of us warm up by the pipe. He stood, surrounded by clouds of thick white steam. His clothing became icy, and the nap of his coat gleamed

like crystal needles. He never talked to us – the job was too valuable to risk just for that.

On Christmas night that year we were all sitting around the stove. In honor of the holiday, its iron sides were redder than usual. We could sense the difference in temperature immediately. All of us sitting around the stove were in a sleepy, lyrical mood.

‘You know, fellows, it would be a good thing to go home. After all, miracles do happen…’ It was Glebov, the horse-driver, speaking. He used to be a professor of philosophy and was famous in our barracks for having forgotten his wife’s name a month earlier. ‘I guess I should knock on wood, but I really mean to go home.’

‘Home?’

‘Sure.’

‘I’ll tell you the truth,’ I answered. ‘I’d rather go back to prison. I’m not joking. I wouldn’t want to go back to my family now. They wouldn’t understand me, they couldn’t. The things that seem important to them I know to be trivial. And the things that are important to me – the little that is left to me – would be incomprehensible to them. I would bring them a new fear, add one more fear to the thousands of fears that already fill their lives. No man should see or know the things that I have seen and known.

‘Prison is another matter altogether. Prison is freedom. It’s the only place I have ever known where people spoke their minds without being afraid. Their souls were at rest there. And their bodies rested too, because they didn’t have to work. There, every hour of our being had meaning.’

‘What a lot of rot,’ the former professor of philosophy said. ‘That’s only because they didn’t beat you during the investigation. Anyone who experienced that method would be of an entirely different opinion.’

‘How about you, Peter Ivanovich, what do you say to that?’ Peter Ivanovich Timofeev, the former director of Ural Trust, smiled and winked at Glebov.

‘I’d go home to my wife. I’d buy some rye bread – a whole loaf! I’d cook up a bucketful of kasha. And some soup with dumplings – a bucket of that too! And I’d eat it all. And I’d be full for the first time in my life. And whatever was left over I’d make my wife eat.’

‘How about you?’ Glebov asked Zvonkov, the pickman in our work gang, who had been a peasant from either Yaroslavl or Kostroma in his

earlier life.

‘I’d go home,’ Zvonkov answered seriously, without the slightest trace of a smile.

‘I think if I could go home, I’d never be more than a step away from my wife. Wherever she’d go, I’d be right on her heels. The only thing is that they’ve taught me how to hate work here. I’ve lost my love for the land. But I’d find something…’

‘And how about you?’ Glebov touched the knees of our orderly.

‘First thing I’d go to Party Headquarters. I’ll never forget all the cigarette butts they had on the floor there.’

‘Stop joking.’

‘I’m dead serious.’

Suddenly I realized that there was only one person left who had not yet answered. And that person was Volodya Dobrovoltsev. He raised his head, not waiting for the question. From the open stove door the light of the glowing coals gleamed in his lively, deep-set eyes.

‘As for me,’ he said in a calm, unhurried voice, ‘I’d like to have my arms and legs cut off and become a human stump – no arms or legs. Then I’d be strong enough to spit in their faces for everything they’re doing to us…’

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# *Handwriting*

Late one night, Chris was summoned to ‘headquarters’. That was how people in camp referred to the small house at the foot of the hill on the edge of the settlement. In this house lived the investigator who handled ‘particularly important matters’. The phrase was a joke, since there were no ‘matters’ that were not particularly important. Any violation of the rules or even the appearance of such a violation was punishable by death. It was either death or a verdict of total innocence. But what man had lived to tell the tale of such a verdict?

Prepared for everything and indifferent to everything, Chris walked down the narrow path leading to headquarters. The path was beaten down thoroughly. A light was burning in the bakery – probably the bread slicer cutting up ‘rations’ for tomorrow’s breakfast. Would there be a breakfast or even a tomorrow for Chris? He did not know, and he drew pleasure from his ignorance. Chris came upon something that looked like a chunk of snow or a piece of ice. He bent down, picked up the frozen object, and realized it was a turnip skin. The skin thawed quickly in his hands, and Chris stuffed it into his mouth. There obviously was no sense in hurrying. Chris examined the whole length of the long, snowy path from the barracks, and he realized that he was the first to walk along it that day. The path led along the outskirts of the settlement to the investigator’s house. All along the way were frozen pieces of turnip that looked as if they were wrapped in cellophane. Chris found ten chunks – some larger, some smaller. It had been a long time since he had seen people who could discard turnip skins in the snow. It had to be a civilian, and not a convict. Perhaps it was the investigator himself. Chris chewed and swallowed all the skins. There was a smell in his mouth that he had long since forgotten – the smell of his native

earth, of fresh vegetables. In a joyous mood Chris knocked at the investigator's door.

The investigator was short, thin, and unshaven. The room contained only his desk and an iron cot with a military blanket and a wrinkled grimy pillow… The desk was a home-made table with rough-hewn drawers crammed with papers. A box of filing cards stood on the window-sill. The bric-à-brac shelf was also heaped with thick folders. There was an ashtray made from a tin can. On the wall a wind-up clock showed ten-thirty. The investigator was heating up the cast-iron stove with papers. He was pale – like all investigators. There was no orderly, and no revolver.

'Sit down, Chris,' the investigator said, using the polite form of address as he shoved a stool in Chris's direction. He himself sat on a home-made chair with a high back.

'I've examined your case,' the investigator said, 'and I want to make you an offer. I don't know if you'll find it appropriate.'

Chris froze in expectation. The investigator was silent for a few moments.

'I have to know a little more about you.'

Chris raised his head and could not restrain a belch – a pleasant belch with the taste of fresh turnip.

'Write an application.'

'An application?'

'Yes, an application. Here's a piece of paper and a pen.'

'What kind of application? About what? To whom?'

'Anyone you like! If you don't want to do an application, write out a poem by Blok. It doesn't make any difference. Do you understand? Write out Pushkin's "Bird".' He began to declaim:

> I smashed a dungeon yesterday
> And freed my captive to the park,
> Returned a singer to the May
> And gave back freedom to a lark.

'That's not Pushkin,' Chris whispered, straining all the faculties of his withered brain.

'Whose is it then?'

'Tumansky.'

‘Tumansky? Never heard of him.’

‘I understand. You need evidence. To see if I killed someone. Or maybe I wrote a letter to the “outside”? Or forged some chits for the camp thugs?’

‘That’s not it at all. We never have trouble gathering that sort of evidence.’ The investigator smiled, revealing his swollen, bleeding gums and small teeth. Brief as the flash of his smile was, it nevertheless brightened the room and Chris’s soul as well. He couldn’t help staring at the investigator’s mouth.

‘Yes,’ the investigator said, catching his gaze, ‘it’s scurvy. The civilians get it too. There aren’t any fresh vegetables.’

Chris thought about the turnip. There are more vitamins in the skin than in the meat. Chris, and not the investigator, had gotten the vitamins. Chris wanted to hold up his end of the conversation and tell how he had sucked and chewed the turnip rind that the investigator had cast aside, but he was afraid of seeming overly casual.

‘Do you understand me or not? I need to take a look at your handwriting.’

Chris understood nothing.

‘Write,’ the investigator commanded: ‘ “To the chief of the mine from Convict Chris. Year of birth, crime, sentence. Application. I request to be transferred to an easier job.” That’s enough.’

The investigator took Chris’s unfinished application, tore it up, and threw it into the fire… The light from the stove burned brighter for a moment.

‘Sit down at the desk. At the corner.’

Chris had the calligraphic handwriting of a professional scribe. He himself drew pleasure from his handwriting, but all his friends laughed at it, saying it was not the handwriting of a professor and doctor of science. It was the handwriting of a quartermaster, and not that of a scholar, a writer, a poet. His friends joked and said he could have made a career for himself as a scribe for the czar in the story by Kuprin.

These jokes did not bother Chris, however, and he continued to recopy his manuscripts before giving them to the typists. The typists were pleased, but they too secretly laughed at this aberration.

His fingers, which had become accustomed to the handles of a pick and shovel, struggled to pick up the pen.

‘Everything is chaos and disorder here,’ the investigator said. ‘I understand that, but you’ll help me straighten things out.’

‘Of course, of course,’ Chris said. The stove was already hot, and the room had warmed up.

‘If I could only have a smoke…’

‘I don’t smoke,’ the investigator said rudely. ‘I don’t have any bread either. You won’t go to work tomorrow. I’ll tell the assignment man.’

In this way, for several months, Chris would come once a week to the unheated, inhospitable house of the camp investigator, recopy papers, and file them.

The snowless winter of 1937–8 had already entered the barracks in death-dealing winds. Each night assignment men would run to the barracks, search for people on their lists, and wake them up to be shipped off. Even before, no one had ever returned from these journeys, but now no one even gave a thought to these nocturnal affairs. If they were preparing a group, there was nothing to be done. The work was too hard to leave a thought for anything else.

Work hours increased and guards were added, but the week passed, and Chris could barely drag himself to the investigator’s familiar office to continue the endless job of filing papers. Chris stopped washing himself and shaving, but the investigator didn’t seem to notice his fleshless cheeks and inflamed eyes. In spite of his hunger, Chris continued to copy and file, but the quantity of papers and folders kept growing and growing to the point where it was impossible to get them in order. Chris copied out endless lists containing only surnames. The top edge of each list was folded over, but Chris never made any attempt to learn the secret of these operations, even though he had only to lift the bent-back edge. Sometimes the investigator would take a stack of ‘cases’ of mysterious origin and hurriedly dictate them to Chris to copy down.

The dictation would end at midnight, and Chris would return to his barracks and sleep and sleep. The next day’s work assignments did not concern him. Week followed week, and Chris continued to lose weight and to write for this investigator, who was young enough to be his son.

Once the investigator picked up the latest file to read the name of the latest victim and bit his lip. He looked at Chris and asked:

‘What’s your full name?’

When Chris told him, the investigator’s face grew whiter than snow. His quick fingers leafed through the thin papers included in the file; there were no more and no less than in any of the other files lying on the floor. The

investigator flung open the stove door, and the room became so bright that it seemed that a soul had been bared to reveal something very important and human at its core. The investigator ripped the folder into shreds, which he shoved into the stove. The room became even brighter. Chris understood nothing. Without looking at Chris, the investigator said: ‘You’d think they were using a stencil. They don’t know what they’re doing, and they don’t care.’ And he stared at Chris with resolute eyes.

‘Let’s continue. Are you ready?’

‘I’m ready,’ Chris said. Only many years later did he realize that the burned file had been his own.

Many of Chris’s friends were shot. The investigator was also shot. But Chris was still alive, and at least once every few years he would remember the burning folder and the investigator’s decisive fingers as he tore up his ‘case’ – a present to the doomed from the giver of doom.

Chris had a life-saving, calligraphic handwriting.

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# *The Businessman*

His name was ‘Ruchkin’; there were a lot of Ruchkins in camp. *Ruchka* means ‘hand’ in Russian, and so ‘Ruchkin’ became a common nickname. If they called you Ruchkin, that meant your hand was injured, not that your teeth were knocked out. But which Ruchkin? The Greek? Or the tall one from the seventh ward? This was Kolya Ruchkin, the businessman.

Kolya’s right hand had been torn off at the wrist by an explosion. It was a case of self-mutilation. In the camp records such incidents were all lumped together in the same column, whether it was a case of a person maiming himself with a gun, explosives, or a sharp tool. It was against the rules to put such persons in the hospital if they didn’t have a high, ‘septic’ temperature. Kolya Ruchkin had just that kind of temperature. For two months Kolya had sprinkled dirt on his wound to keep it infected. In the end, however, his youth had won out, and his days in the hospital were coming to an end. It was time to return to the mine. Kolya, however, was not afraid. What threat could the gold-mines hold for him, a one-handed man?

Camp authorities struggled with the problem as best they could. One-armed men were forced to spend the entire working day in deep, loose, crystal snow, tramping down a path for people and tractors at the timber-clearing sites. Then convicts began to blow off their feet by placing a nitroglycerin capsule in the boot and lighting a Bickford fuse protruding from their boot at the knee. So they stopped sending one-armed men to tramp down snow. As for panning for gold, how could a one-armed man even attempt it? At best, in the summer, they could be sent for a day or two. If it wasn’t raining.

Kolya’s mouth spread wide in a toothy grin; scurvy had not yet taken his teeth. Kolya Ruchkin had already learned to roll a cigarette with one hand.

Well-rested from the hospital and only slightly hungry, Kolya smiled and smiled. He was a businessman, this Kolya Ruchkin. Incessantly bartering and trading, he smuggled forbidden herring to the diarrhea patients in exchange for bread. They too needed to extend their stay in the hospital. Kolya would trade soup for porridge or porridge for two portions of soup. He knew how to ‘divvy up’ a ration of bread entrusted to him to exchange for tobacco. He got the bread from the patients who were too ill to get out of their beds – people swollen with scurvy, people with serious fractures from the Traumatic Illnesses Ward. (Or, as Pavel Pavlovich, the orderly, used to say, never suspecting the irony of his error: ‘The Dramatic Illnesses Ward’.)

Kolya’s happiness began the day his hand was blown off. He was almost full, almost warm. As for the curses of the camp authorities and the threats of the doctors, Kolya considered them all trivial. And they were.

On several occasions during this blissful stay in the hospital, strange and frightening things had happened. Kolya’s non-existent hand ached just as before. He could feel every bit of it. His fingers were bent in the position they had acquired from grasping the handle of a pick and shovel – no more and no less. It was difficult to grasp a spoon with such a hand, but there was no need for a spoon back at the mine. Everything edible was slurped directly from the bowl: soup and porridge and the thin cranberry pudding and tea. It was possible to hold a ration of bread in those eternally clenched fingers. But Ruchkin had blown them off altogether. Why then did he still feel those fingers, clenched just as they had been back at the mine? After all, the fingers on his left hand had begun to unflex, to bend like rusty hinges that had received a drop of oil, and Ruchkin cried from joy. Already, if he lay face down with his left hand pressed under his stomach, he could unbend the hand – easily.

The pain in his missing hand usually came at night. Cold from fear, Ruchkin would wake up and cry, afraid to ask his neighbors for advice. Maybe this meant something? Maybe he was going mad?

The missing hand had begun to hurt less and less frequently, the world was returning to its normal state, and Ruchkin rejoiced in his happiness. And he smiled and smiled, thinking how well he’d pulled the whole thing off.

The orderly, Pavel Pavlovich, came out of the toilet stall holding an unlit home-made cigarette in his hand and sat down next to Ruchkin.

‘Can I get you a light, Pavel Pavlovich?’ Ruchkin groveled before the orderly. ‘Just one second!’

Ruchkin rushed to the stove, opened the door, and with his left hand scattered a few burning coals on the floor. Tossing up the smoldering coal with agility, Ruchkin rolled it back and forth in his palm. The coal blackened but kept on flaming, and Ruchkin blew on it to support the flame, holding it directly up to the face of the orderly who was bending forward slightly. Holding the cigarette in his mouth, the orderly sucked in as much air as he could through the cigarette and finally managed to light up. Shreds of blue smoke rose above the orderly’s head, and Ruchkin’s nostrils flared. In the wards, patients were awakened by that smell, and they tried vainly to inhale the smoke which was no smoke at all but a shade fleeing from smoke…

It was clear that Ruchkin would get the butt. He thought how he would take two drags himself and then take the butt to Surgical Ward to the ‘political’ with the broken back. That would get him a whole ration, which was no joke. And if Pavel Pavlovich left a bit more, that would produce a new cigarette that would be worth more than just a ration.

‘You’ll be checking out of here soon, Ruchkin,’ Pavel Pavlovich allowed in an unhurried fashion. ‘You really dragged it out, fattened yourself up. But that’s water under the bridge… Tell me, how’d you get your nerve up to do it? I want to tell my children. If I ever see them.’

‘Well, I don’t hide it, Pavel Pavlovich,’ Ruchkin said, hurriedly sizing up the situation. Evidently Pavel Pavlovich had not rolled the cigarette very tightly. You could just see the flame move along the paper when he inhaled. The orderly’s cigarette didn’t glow; it burned like a Bickford fuse. Just like a Bickford fuse. That meant he had to make it a short story.

‘Well?’

‘I wake up in the morning, get my ration, and stick it inside my shirt. We get two rations per day. I go to Mishka, the powderman. “How’s about it?” I say.

‘ “All right,” he says.

‘I give him the whole eight-hundred gram ration for a capsule and a section of fuse. Then I go back to my “countrymen” in my barracks. We weren’t really from the same area, we just called each other that. One’s name was Fedya, and the other was Petro, I think.

‘ “Ready?” I ask.

‘ “Ready,” they say. “Let’s have it,” I say. They give me their two rations; I put them under my shirt, and we push off for work. When we get there, while the work gang is being issued tools, we take a burning log from the fire and go behind a heap of mined rock. We stand shoulder to shoulder, and all three of us hold the capsule – each with his right hand. We light the fuse and – Zap! – fingers fly everywhere. Our gang leader starts shouting: “What the hell are you doing?” The senior guard marches us off to camp, to the first-aid station.

‘They bandaged us up there. Later my countrymen got sent away somewhere, but I had a temperature and ended up in the hospital.’

Pavel Pavlovich had almost finished his cigarette, but Ruchkin was so engrossed in telling his story that he nearly forgot about the butt.

‘But what about the rations? You had two left. Did you eat them?’

‘Damn right! I ate them right after I got bandaged up. The other two wanted me to break a piece off for them. I told them to go to hell. Business is business.’

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# *Captain Tolly's Love*

In the gold-mine work gang, the easiest job was that of carpenter. He would nail boards together to make a walkway for wheelbarrows loaded with earth for the washer. These wooden 'whiskers' stretched out in all directions from the central walkway. From above, that is from the gold-washer, the walkway looked like a monstrous centipede, flattened, dried, and nailed for ever to the gold-mine's open workings.

The carpenter had a 'pushover' job compared with that of the miner or the wheelbarrow man. The carpenter's hands knew neither the handle of the wheelbarrow, the shovel, the feel of a crowbar, nor the pick. An axe and a handful of nails were his only tools. Normally the gang boss would rotate men on this crucial job to give everyone at least a slight chance to rest up. Of course, fingers clutched in a death grip around a shovel or pick handle cannot be straightened out by one day of easy work. A man needs to be idle for at least a year for that to happen. But there is, nevertheless, some measure of justice in this alternation of easy and hard labor. The rotation was not rigid: a weaker person had a better chance of working a day as a carpenter. One didn't have to be a cabinet-maker or carpenter to hew boards and drive nails. People with a university education coped with the job quite well.

In our work gang this pushover job wasn't evenly distributed. The job of carpenter was always filled by one and the same person – Isaiah Davidovich Rabinovich, former director of Soviet Government Insurance. Rabinovich was sixty-eight years old, but the old man was in good health and hoped to survive his ten-year sentence. In camp it is the work that kills, and anyone who praises it is either a scoundrel or a fool. Twenty-year-olds, thirty-year-olds died one after another, and that was why they were brought to this 'special zone', but Rabinovich, the carpenter, lived on. He evidently

knew someone among the camp higher-ups, had some mysterious pull. He even got office jobs. Isaiah Rabinovich understood that every day and every hour spent some place other than the mine promised him life and salvation, whereas the mine offered him only death. There was no reason to bring pensioners to the special zone. Rabinovich's nationality had brought him here to die.

But Rabinovich was stubborn and did not want to die.

Once we were locked up together, 'isolated' for the first of May. It happened every year.

'I've been observing you for a long time,' Rabinovich said, 'and I was pleased to know that someone was watching me, studying me, and that it was not someone who was doing it as part of his job.'

I smiled at Rabinovich with a crooked smile that ripped open my wounded lips and tore my gums, which were already bloody from scurvy.

He said, 'You're probably a good person. You don't speak degradingly of women.'

'I hadn't noticed, Isaiah Davidovich. Can it be that they really talk about women here?'

'They do, but you don't take part.'

'To tell the truth, Isaiah Davidovich, I consider women to be better than men. I understand the dual unity of man and woman, of husband and wife, etc. And then there's motherhood and labor. Women even work better than men.'

'That's true,' said Beznozhenko, a bookkeeper who was sitting next to Rabinovich. 'Every Saturday when they make you work without pay you're better off not being next to a woman. She'll work you to death. And every time you want to take time out for a smoke, she'll get mad.'

'That too,' Rabinovich said distractedly, 'probably, probably… Well, here we are in Kolyma, and a lot of women have come to find their husbands. Theirs is a terrible lot, what with all those syphilitic higher-ups exploiting them. You know that just as well as I do. But no man has ever come out here to follow a convicted, exiled wife. I wasn't director of Government Insurance for long, but it was enough to get ten years. For many years I was in charge of the overseas division of Government Insurance. Do you know what that means?'

'I understand,' I said without thinking, for I had no idea what that meant.

Rabinovich smiled very properly and very politely.

‘Aside from my work for Government Insurance abroad…’

And glancing suddenly into my eyes, Rabinovich sensed that I was not interested in anything. At least not until dinner.

The conversation was renewed after a mouthful of soup.

‘If you like, I’ll tell you about myself. I lived abroad a lot, and everywhere I’ve been – in the hospital or the barracks – they always ask me to describe one thing: how, where, and what I ate over there. A sort of culinary motivation. Gastronomic dreams and nightmares. Would you like that kind of story?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Good. I was an insurance agent in Odessa. I worked for the Russia, an insurance agency. I was young and tried to work well and honestly for the owner. I learned languages. He sent me abroad. I married the owner’s daughter. I lived abroad right up to the revolution. The owner was like Savva Morozov;* he was laying his bets on the Bolsheviks. I was abroad during the revolution with my wife and daughter. My father-in-law died an accidental death; it had nothing to do with the revolution. I knew a lot of people, but none of them had any influence after the October Revolution. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes.’

‘The Soviet government was just getting on its feet. People came to see me. Russia, the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, was making its first purchases abroad and needed credit. But the word of the State Bank wasn’t sufficient collateral for a loan. A note from me, however, my recommendation, was enough. So I fixed up Kreiger, the match king, with the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. After a few deals like that they let me come home. And I had some delicate problems to work on here at home as well. Have you heard anything about Spitzbergen and how the deal was paid for?’

‘A little.’

‘Well, I was the one who loaded the Norwegian gold on to our schooner in the North Sea. So aside from handling foreign accounts, I had a number of assignments of that sort. The Soviet government was my new boss, and I served it just as I had the insurance agency – honestly.’

Rabinovich’s calm, intelligent eyes peered directly at me.

‘I’m going to die. I’m already an old man. I’ve seen life. But I feel sorry for my wife. She’s in Moscow. My daughter’s in Moscow too. They haven’t

been picked up yet as members of the family… I guess I'll never see them again. They write to me often, send packages. How about you? Do you get packages?'

'No, I wrote that I didn't want any packages. If I survive, it'll be without anyone's help. I'll be obligated only to myself.'

'There's something noble in that. But my wife and daughter would never understand.'

'Nothing noble at all. You and I are not only beyond good and evil, we're also beyond anything human. After all that I've seen, I don't want to be obligated to anyone – not even my own wife.'

'I can't say that I understand that; as for myself, I write and ask for more. The packages mean a job in bookkeeping for a month. I gave my best suit for that job. You probably thought the director felt sorry for an old man…'

'I thought you had an "in" with the camp administration.'

'So I'm a stool-pigeon? But who needs a seventy-year-old stool-pigeon? No, I simply gave a bribe, a big bribe. And I'm not sharing the rewards of that bribe with anyone – not even you. I get my packages, write, ask for more.'

After that first of May we returned to the same barracks, and our berths, something like those in a railroad car, were next to each other. I had accumulated a lot of experience in the camps, and the old man, Rabinovich, had a young man's curiosity for life. When he saw that my rage could not be contained, he began to have a certain respect for me – nothing more than respect. Maybe it was an old man's longing to talk about himself to anyone he might meet on a train, about the life he wanted to leave behind him on earth.

Lice did not frighten us. Precisely when I met Isaiah Rabinovich, my scarf was stolen. It was only a cotton scarf, of course, but it was, nevertheless, a real knitted scarf.

We were being led out to work. The method they used to hurry things along was called 'last man out'. The overseers would grab people, and the guards would push them with their rifle butts, driving the crowd of ragged men down the icy hill. The last man would be grabbed by the hands and feet and thrown down the hill. Both Rabinovich and I tried to jump down as quickly as possible and get in formation on the area below, where the guards were already dealing out blows to speed up the process. Most of the

time we managed to roll down the hill without anything happening to us and to reach the mine alive. Once we got there, it was up to God.

The last man in formation was tossed from the icy hill, tied to the horse-sleigh, and dragged to the work site. Both Rabinovich and I were fortunate enough to avoid that fatal trip.

The camp zone was selected so as to force us to climb upward when we returned from work, scrambling up the steps, grabbing at the remains of naked, broken shrubs. One might think that after a day in the gold-mine, people would not have the strength to crawl upward. But they crawled – even if it took them a half-hour to reach the camp gates and the barracks zone. The usual inscription hung over the gates: ‘Labor is honor, glory, nobility, and heroism.’ They would go to the cafeteria and drink something from bowls. From there they would go to the barracks to sleep. In the morning it would all begin again.

Not everyone was hungry here – just why, I never learned. When it got warmer, in the spring, the white nights began, and they started playing a terrible game in the camp cafeteria called ‘bait-fishing’. A ration of bread would be put on the table, and everyone would hide around the corner to wait for the hungry victim to approach, be enticed by the bread, touch it, and take it. Then everyone would rush out from around the corner, from the darkness, from ambush, and there would commence the beating to death of the thief, who was usually a living skeleton. I never ran into this form of amusement anywhere except at Jelhala. The chief organizer was Dr Krivitsky, an old revolutionary and former deputy commissar of defense industries. His accomplice in the setting out of these terrible baits was a correspondent from the newspaper *Izvestia* – Zaslavsky.

I had my knitted cotton scarf. The paramedic in the hospital had given it to me when I was checking out. When our group reached the Jelhala mine, a gray, unsmiling face, crossed and criss-crossed with northern wrinkles and scarred with the marks of old frostbite, confronted me.

‘Let’s trade!’

‘No.’

‘Sell it to me!’

‘No.’

All the locals – about twenty of them had come running up to our truck – stared at me, amazed at my rashness, foolishness, pride.

‘He’s a convict like us, but he’s the group leader,’ someone prompted me, but I shook my head.

The brows shot upward on the unsmiling face. He nodded to someone and pointed to me.

But they lacked the nerve for open banditry in this camp. They had another, more simple way – and I knew it, so I tied the scarf around my neck and never took it off again – not in the bathhouse, not at night, never.

It would have been easy to keep the scarf, but the lice wouldn’t leave me in peace. There were so many lice in the scarf that it moved all by itself when I took it off just for a minute to shake myself free of lice and put it on the table beside the lamp.

For two weeks I struggled with the shadows of thieves, trying to convince myself that these were shadows and not thieves.

At the end of two weeks I hung the scarf, on one occasion, in front of me, turned around to pour myself a mug of water, and the scarf immediately disappeared, plucked away by the hand of an experienced thief. The theft, which I knew was coming, which I felt, which I foresaw, demanded so much of my energy that I was glad I no longer had to struggle to keep the scarf. For the first time since arriving at Jelhala, I fell into a sound sleep and had a good dream – perhaps because the thousands of lice had disappeared, and my body could relax.

Isaiah Rabinovich had observed my struggle with sympathy. Of course, he had not made the slightest effort to help me preserve the lousy scarf. In camp it was each man for himself, and I didn’t expect any assistance.

But Isaiah Rabinovich had been working for several days in bookkeeping, and he slipped me a dinner coupon to console me for my loss. And I thanked Rabinovich.

After work everyone lay down to sleep, spreading their dirty work clothes under them.

Isaiah Rabinovich said:

‘I want to ask your advice on a certain question. It has nothing to do with camp.’

‘About General de Gaulle?’

‘Don’t laugh. I’ve received an important letter. That is, it’s important to me.’

With my entire body I made an effort to drive away encroaching sleep, shook myself, and began to listen.

‘I already told you that my wife and daughter are in Moscow. They haven’t been touched. My daughter wants to get married. I got a letter from her. And from her fiancé – here it is.’ And Rabinovich took a package of letters from under his pillow – a package of pretty sheets with swift, precise handwriting. I looked and saw that the letters were Latin, not Cyrillic.

‘Moscow permitted these letters to be sent on to me. Do you know English?’

‘Me? English? No.’

‘This is in English. It’s from her fiancé. He asks permission to marry my daughter. He writes: “My parents have already given permission, and there remains only the permission of the parents of my future wife…” And here is my daughter’s letter. “Papa, my husband, naval attaché of the United States of America, Captain Tolly, asks your permission for our marriage. Papa, answer right away.” ’

‘What sort of delirium is that?’ I said.

‘It’s no delirium. It’s a letter from Captain Tolly to me. And a letter from my daughter. And a letter from my wife.’

Rabinovich slowly searched out a louse under his shirt, pulled it out, and crushed it on the bunk.

‘Your daughter wants your permission to get married?’

‘Yes.’

‘Your daughter’s fiancé, the naval attaché of the United States, Captain Tolly, wants permission to marry your daughter?’

‘Yes.’

‘So run to the camp director and request that a special delivery letter be sent.’

‘But I don’t want to give my permission for this marriage. That’s exactly what I wanted to ask your advice about.’

I was simply dumbfounded by these letters, these stories, this act.

‘If I agree to the marriage, I’ll never see her again. She’ll go away with Captain Tolly.’

‘Listen, Isaiah Davidovich, you’re going to be seventy soon. I consider you a reasonable person.’

‘Those are just my feelings, and I haven’t thought the matter out yet. I’ll send a letter tomorrow. It’s time to go to sleep.’

‘Let’s celebrate this event tomorrow. We’ll eat our kasha before the soup. And the soup – after the kasha. We can even roast some bread. Make toast.

We'll boil the bread in water. What do you say to that, Isaiah Davidovich?'

Even an earthquake could not have kept me from sleep, from the unconsciousness of dream. I closed my eyes and forgot about Captain Tolly.

The next day Rabinovich wrote the letter and dropped it in the mailbox near the guard post.

Not long after that I was taken away for trial. They tried me and returned me to the same camp. I didn't have a scarf, but then the group leader was gone as well. I arrived just like any other emaciated prisoner. But Isaiah Rabinovich recognized me and brought me a piece of bread. He had nailed down his job in bookkeeping and had learned not to think about tomorrow. The mine had taught Rabinovich a lesson.

'I believe you were here when my daughter was getting married?'

'Of course… Let's have it.'

'Captain Tolly married my daughter. I believe that was where we stopped.' Rabinovich resumed his tale. His eyes smiled. 'Captain Tolly stayed for three months, and then he got a position on a battleship in the Pacific Ocean and left on his assignment. My daughter, Captain Tolly's wife, wasn't allowed to leave. Stalin viewed these marriages with foreigners as a personal insult, so the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs whispered to Captain Tolly: "Go on alone, have a good time. What's keeping you? Get married again." In a word, the final answer was that my daughter was sent to work in Stockholm at the Swedish Embassy.'

'As a spy? A secret assignment?'

Rabinovich looked at me in displeasure at my chatter.

'I don't know. I don't know what sort of work. She was in the embassy. My daughter worked for a week there. Then a plane came from America, and she flew away to her husband. Now I'll be expecting letters from places other than Moscow.'

'And what about the local camp authorities?'

'They're afraid. They don't dare to have an opinion on such matters. An investigator came from Moscow to question me. And he left.'

Isaiah Rabinovich's happiness didn't stop there. The greatest miracle was that his sentence ended when it was supposed to – to the day, without figuring in his workdays.

The body of the former insurance agent was strong enough for him to get a job as a financial inspector in Kolyma. They did not let Rabinovich go

back to the mainland. He died about two years before the Twentieth Party Congress where Khrushchev gave his famous de-Stalinization speech.

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# *In the Bathhouse*

In those cutting jokes that are unique to the camps, the bathhouse sessions are often referred to as tyranny. A traditional ironic formula originating within the camp's very observant criminal element runs: 'Tyranny! The politicals are being herded into the bathhouse.' This joking remark is fraught with bitter truth.

The bathhouse is a negative event, a burden in the convict's life. This observation is a testimony of that 'shift of values' which is the main quality that the camp instills in its inmates.

How can that be? Avoidance of the bathhouse constantly perplexes both doctors and camp officials who view this absenteeism as a kind of protest, a violation of discipline, a sort of challenge to the camp regime. But fact is fact and the bathhouse ritual, practiced over the years, represents an event in the life of the camp. The guards are mobilized and instructed, and all the supervisors, not to mention the guards, take part personally in catching truants. Running the bathhouse and disinfecting clothes in the steam rooms is the direct and official responsibility of the Sanitation Squad. The entire lower administrative hierarchy consisting of convicts (group leaders, foremen) also abandons its normal affairs and devotes itself to the bathhouse. Ultimately even production supervisors are inevitably drawn into this great event. An entire gamut of production measures are applied on bathhouse days (three a month).

On these days everyone is on his feet from early morning to late at night.

How can this be? Is it possible that a human being, no matter what state of deprivation he might be reduced to, will refuse to wash himself in the bathhouse and free himself from the dirt and sweat that cover his body with its festering skin diseases? Can it be that anyone would refuse to feel cleaner, if only for an hour?

There is a Russian phrase: a person may be referred to as ‘happy as if he just came from the bathhouse’. Indeed, the phrase accurately reflects the physical bliss experienced by a person who has just washed himself.

Can it be that people have so lost their minds that they do not understand, do not want to understand, that life is better without lice than with them? There are a lot of lice in the crowded barracks and they can’t be eliminated without the disinfestation chamber.

Of course, infestation is a relative concept. A dozen or so lice in one’s clothing doesn’t count. Infestation begins to trouble both the doctors and one’s comrades when the lice can be brushed off one’s clothing, when a wool sweater stirs all by itself through flea-power.

Thus, can it be that a human being – no matter who – would not want to free himself from this torment that keeps him from sleeping and against which he struggles by scratching his own dirty body till it bleeds?

No, of course not. But the first ‘but’ arises over the lack of any work-release time for the bathhouse. Bathhouse sessions are arranged either before or after work. After many hours of work in the cold (and it’s no easier in the summer) when all thoughts and hopes are concentrated on the desire to reach one’s bunk and food so as to fall asleep as soon as possible, the bathhouse delay is almost unendurable. The bathhouse is always located an appreciable distance from living quarters, since it serves not only convicts but civilians from the village as well. Usually it is situated in the civilian village, and not in camp.

The bathhouse always takes up much more than the hour necessary to wash and delouse clothing. Many people have to wash themselves, one group after the other, and all late-comers have to wait their turn in the cold. They are brought to the bathhouse directly from work without any stopover in camp, since they would all scatter and find some way to evade going there. When it’s very cold the camp administration attempts to shorten the outside waiting period and admits the convicts directly to the dressing-rooms. The dressing-rooms are intended for ten to fifteen persons but the camp authorities pack in up to a hundred men in outer clothing. The dressing-rooms are either unheated or poorly heated. Everything and everyone is mixed together – naked men and men in coats. There is a constant shoving, swearing, and general hubbub. Profiting from the noise and the crush, both common criminals and political prisoners steal their neighbors’ belongings. Different work gangs who live separately have been

brought together, and it’s never possible to recover anything. Furthermore, there’s nowhere to entrust anything for safe keeping.

The second, or rather the third ‘but’ arises from the fact that the janitors are obliged to clean up the barracks while the work gang is in the bathhouse. The barracks are swept, washed, and everything judged to be unnecessary is mercilessly thrown out. In camp every rag is treasured, and enormous amounts of energy are expended to acquire a spare pair of mittens or extra foot rags. Bulkier things are treasured even more, and food highest of all. All this disappears without a trace and in full accordance with the law while the convicts are in the bathhouse. It’s useless to take things to work with you and from there to the bathhouse; they are immediately noticed by the vigilant and experienced eye of the camp criminal element. Mittens or foot rags can be easily exchanged for a smoke.

It is characteristic of man, be he beggar or Nobel laureate, that he quickly acquires petty things. In any move (having nothing to do with jail) we are amazed at the number of small things we have accumulated and cannot imagine where they all come from. And all these possessions are given away, sold, thrown out – until we achieve with great difficulty the level necessary to close the lid of the suitcase. The same is true of the convict. He is, after all, a working man and needs a needle and material for patches, and an extra bowl perhaps. All this is cast out and then reaccumulated after each bathhouse day, unless it is buried somewhere deep in the snow to be dug up again the next day.

In Dostoevsky’s time the bathhouse provided one basin of hot water (anything over that had to be paid for). That standard has been retained to this very day. It’s always a wooden basin with not very hot water. Prisoners are permitted any amount of those burning pieces of ice that stick to the fingers; they’re kept in barrels. There’s never a second basin to dilute the water, and the hot water is cooled by the pieces of ice. That, however, is all the water a convict receives to wash the hair on his head and his entire body.

A convict must be able to wash himself with any portion of water – from a spoonful to a cistern-full. If he gets only a spoonful, he wets his gummy festering eyes and considers his toilet completed. If he gets a cistern of water, he splashes it on his neighbors, refills his basin every minute, and somehow manages to use up his portion in the allotted time.

All this testifies to quick-wittedness in the resolution of such an everyday question as the bathhouse. But it does not, of course, solve the question of cleanliness. The dream of getting clean in the bathhouse is an impossible dream.

In the bathhouse itself there is constant uproar accompanied by smoke, crowding, and shouting; there's even a common turn of speech: 'to shout as in the bathhouse'. There is no extra water, and no one can buy any. But it's not just water that's in short supply. There's not enough heat either. The iron stoves are not always red-hot the way they should be, and most of the time it's simply cold in the bathhouse. The feeling of coldness is increased by a thousand drafts from under the doors, from cracks. Cracks between the logs are stuffed with moss which quickly dries up and turns to powder, leaving holes to the outside. Every stay in the bathhouse involves the risk of catching cold – a danger that everyone, including the doctors, is aware of. After every bathhouse session the list of people freed from work is lengthened. These are truly ill people, and the doctors know it.

Remember that the wood for the bathhouse is physically carried in on the evening of the previous day on the shoulders of the work gang. Again, this delays returning to the barracks by about two hours and cannot but create an anti-bathhouse mood.

But that's not all. The worst thing is the obligatory disinfestation chamber.

In camp there is 'individual' and 'common' underwear; such are the verbal pearls found in official speech. 'Individual' underwear is newer and somewhat better and is reserved for trusties, convict foremen, and other privileged persons. No convict has his own underwear. The so-called individual underwear is washed separately and more carefully. It's also replaced more often. 'Common' underwear is underwear for anyone. It's handed out in the bathhouse right after bathing in exchange for dirty underwear, which is gathered and counted separately beforehand. There's no opportunity to select anything according to size. Clean underwear is a pure lottery, and I felt a strange and terrible pity at seeing adult men cry over the injustice of receiving worn-out clean underwear in exchange for dirty good underwear. Nothing can take the mind of a human being off the unpleasantnesses that comprise life. Only vaguely do the convicts realize that, after all, this inconvenience will end the next bathhouse day, that their lives are what's ruined, that there is no reason to worry over some

underwear, that they received the old, good underwear by chance. But no, they quarrel and cry. This is, of course, a manifestation of those psychoses that are characteristic of a convict's every action, of that same 'dementia' which one neuropathologist termed a universal illness.

The spiritual ups and downs of a convict's life have shifted to the point where receiving underwear from a small dark window leading into the depths of the bathhouse is an event that transcends the nerves. Having washed themselves, the men gather at the window far in advance of the actual distribution of underwear. Over and over again they discuss in detail the underwear received last time, the underwear received five years ago at Bamlag. As soon as the board is raised that closes off the small window from within, they rush to it, jostling each other with their slippery, dirty, and stinking bodies.

The underwear is not always dry. Too often it's handed out wet – either there wasn't time enough to dry it or they were short of logs. To put on wet or damp underwear is not a pleasant experience for anyone.

Curses rain down upon the indifferent heads of the men working in the bathhouse. Those who have to put on the damp underwear truly begin to feel the cold, but they must wait for the disinfected outer garments to be handed out.

What exactly is the disinfestation chamber? It is a pit covered with a tarpaulin roof and smeared with clay on the inside. The heat is provided by an iron stove, the mouth of which faces out into the entrance hall. Pea coats, quilted jackets, and pants are hung on poles, the door is tightly shut, and the disinfector begins 'laying on the heat'. There are no thermometers or bags of sulfur to determine the temperature achieved. Success depends on chance or the diligence of the disinfector.

At best only those things that hang close to the stove are well heated. The remainder, blocked from the heat by the closer items, only get damp. Those in the far corner are taken out cold. No lice are killed by this disinfestation chamber. It's only a formality, and the apparatus has been created for the purpose of tormenting the convict still more.

The doctors understand this very well, but the camp can't be left without a disinfestation chamber. When the prisoners have spent an additional hour waiting in the large dressing room, totally indistinguishable clothing is dragged out by the armful and thrown on the floor. It is up to each person to locate his clothing. The convict swears and dons padded trousers, jacket,

and pea coat – all wet from the steam. Afterward, at night, he will sacrifice his last hours of sleep to attempt to dry his clothing at the barracks stove.

It is not hard to understand why no one likes bathhouse day.

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# *The Green Procurator*

Values shift here, in Kolyma, and any one of our concepts – even though its name may be pronounced in the usual way and spelled with the usual letters – may contain some new element or meaning, something for which there is no equivalent on the mainland. Here everything is judged by different standards: customs and habits are unique, and the meaning of every word has changed.

When it is impossible to describe a new event, feeling, or concept for which ordinary human language has no word, a new term is created, borrowed from the language of the legislator of style and taste in the Far North – the criminal world.

Semantic metamorphoses touch not only such concepts as Love, Family, Honor, Work, Virtue, Vice, Crime, but even words that are quite specific to the world of the Far North and that have been born within its bowels – for example, ESCAPE…

In my early youth I read about Kropotkin's flight, in 1876, from the Fortress of Peter and Paul. His was a classic escape: a daredevil cab at the prison gates, a lady with a revolver under her cape, an exact calculation of the number of steps from the guardhouse door, the prisoner's sprint under fire, the clatter of horse hooves on the cobblestone pavement.

Later I read memoirs of persons who had been sent to exile in Siberia under the czars. I found their escapes from Yakutia and Verxoyansk bitterly disappointing: a sleigh-ride with horses hitched nose to tail, arrival at the train station, purchase of a ticket at the ticket window… I could never understand why this was called an 'escape'. Such escapes were once called 'unwarranted absence from place of residence', and I believe that this was a far more accurate description than the romantic word 'flight'. Even the escape of the Social Revolutionary Zenzinov did not give the feeling of a

real escape like Kropotkin's. An American yacht simply approached the boat on which Zenzinov was fishing and took him on board.

There were always plenty of escape attempts in Kolyma, and they were all unsuccessful, because of the particularly severe nature of the polar region, which the czarist government never attempted to colonize with convicts – as it did Sakhalin.

Distances to the mainland ran into thousands of miles; the nearest settlements were those surrounding the mines of Far Northern Construction and Aldan, and we were separated from them by a taiga vacuum of six hundred miles.

True, the distance to America was significantly shorter. At its narrowest point, the Bering Strait is only fifty-five miles wide, but the border was so heavily guarded as to be absolutely impassable.

The main escape route led to Yakutsk. From there travel had to be either by water or on horseback. There were no planes in those days, but even so it would have been a simple matter to lock up the planes reliably.

It is understandable that there were no escape attempts in the winter; all convicts (and not only convicts) dream fervently of spending the winter under a roof next to a cast-iron stove.

Spring presents an unbearable temptation; it is always that way. To the compelling meteorological factor is added the power of cold logic. A trip through the taiga is possible only during the summer, when it is possible to eat grass, mushrooms, berries, roots, or pancakes baked from moss flour, to catch field mice, chipmunks, squirrels, jays, rabbits…

No matter how cold the summer nights are in the north, in the land of the permafrost, no experienced man will catch cold if he sleeps on a rock, makes a mattress of grass or branches, avoids sleeping on his back, and changes position regularly from one side to the other.

The choice of Kolyma as a camp location was a brilliant one, because of the impossibility of escape. Nevertheless, here as everywhere, the power of illusion is strong, and the price of such an illusion is paid in bitter days spent in punishment cells, additional sentences, beatings, hunger, and frequently death.

There were many escape attempts, which always began when the first emeralds colored the fingernails of the larches.

The convicts who tried to escape were almost always newcomers serving their first year, men in whose hearts freedom and vanity had not yet been

annihilated, men whose reason had not yet come to grips with Far North conditions so different from those of the mainland. Until then the mainland was, after all, the only world that they had known. Distressed to the very depths of their souls by everything they saw, the beatings, torture, mockery, degradation, these newcomers fled – some more efficiently, others less – but all came to the same end. Some were caught in two days, others in a week, still others in two weeks…

At first there were no long sentences for escaped prisoners. Ultimately, however, they were tried under Point 14 of Article 58 of the Criminal Code. Escape is a refusal to work and is therefore counter-revolutionary sabotage. Ten years was thus to become the minimal ‘supplementary’ sentence for an escape attempt. Repeated attempts were punished with twenty-five years. This frightened no one, nor did it lessen the number of escape attempts or of burglaries. But all that was to come later.

The enormous staff of camp guards with their thousands of German shepherds combined efforts with the border patrol and the vast army stationed in Kolyma and masquerading under the title ‘The Kolyma Regiment’. Together, these groups had more than enough manpower to catch one hundred out of every hundred escapees.

How could escape be possible, and wouldn’t it have been simpler to beef up the camp guards rather than hunt down those who had already escaped?

Economic considerations justify maintaining a staff of ‘headhunters’, since this is cheaper than setting up a ‘deadbolt’ system of the prison variety. It is extraordinarily difficult to prevent the escape itself. Even the gigantic network of informers recruited from the prisoners themselves and paid with cheap cigarettes and soup is inadequate.

This is a question of human psychology with its twists and turns, and it is impossible to foresee who will attempt an escape, or when, or why. What happens is often quite different from that which might have been expected.

Of course, all sorts of preventive measures can be taken – arrests, imprisonment in those prisons within prisons that are called ‘punishment zones’, transfers of ‘suspicious’ prisoners from one place to another. Many such measures have been worked out, and they probably lessen the number of escapes. There would have been even more attempts had it not been for these punishment zones situated deep in the taiga under heavy guard.

People do manage to escape even from punishment zones, however, while no one attempts to escape from unguarded work sites. Anything can

happen in camp.

Spring is a time of preparation. More guards and dogs are sent in, and additional training and special instructions are the rule. As for the prisoners, they also prepare – hiding tins of food and dried bread, selecting ‘partners’.

There is a single example of a classic escape from Kolyma, carefully prepared and executed in a brilliant, methodical fashion. It is the exception that proves the rule. Even in this escape, however, a tiny insignificant thread was left that led back to the escapee – even though the search took two years. Evidently it was a question of the professional pride of the investigators, Vidokov and Lekokov, and considerably greater attention, effort, and money were spent on it than was normally done.

It is curious that the escapee who demonstrated such energy and wit was neither a ‘political’ nor a professional criminal, either of whom might have been expected to specialize in such affairs. He was an embezzler with a ten-year sentence.

Even this is understandable. An escape by a ‘political’ is always related to the mood of the ‘outside’ and – like a hunger strike in prison – draws its strength from its connection with the outside. A prisoner must know, and know well in advance, the eventual goal of his escape. What goal could any political have had in 1937? People whose political connections are accidental and insignificant do not flee from prison. They might try to escape to their family and friends, but in 1938 that would have involved bringing repressive measures down on the heads of anyone whom the escapee might have seen on the street.

In such instances there was no getting off with fifteen or twenty years. The political would have been a threat to the very lives of his friends and family. Someone would have had to conceal him, render him assistance. None of the politicals in 1938 tried to escape.

The few men who actually served out their sentences and returned home found that their own wives checked the correctness and legality of their release papers and raced their neighbors to the police station to announce their husbands’ arrival.

Reprisals taken upon innocent persons were quite simple. Instead of being reprimanded or issued a warning, they were tortured and then sentenced to ten or twenty years of prison or hard labor. All that was left to such persons was death. And they died with no thought of escape, displaying once more that national quality of passivity glorified by the poet

Tiutchev and shamelessly exploited on later occasions by politicians of all levels.

The professional criminals made no attempts to escape because they did not believe they could succeed in returning to the mainland. Moreover, experienced employees of the camp police and the Criminal Investigation Service claim to have a sixth sense that enables them to recognize professional criminals. It is as if the criminal were stamped with the indelible mark of Cain. The most eloquent example of the existence of this sixth sense occurred during a month-long search for an armed robber and murderer. The search was being conducted along the roads of Kolyma, and an order was issued that he be shot on sight.

The detective, Sevastyanov, stopped a stranger in a sheepskin coat standing beside a tank at a filling-station. When the man turned around, Sevastyanov shot him in the forehead. Sevastyanov had never seen the bandit, who was fully dressed in winter clothing. It is impossible to examine tattoos on every passer-by, and the description given to Sevastyanov was very vague. The photograph was so inadequate that it too was of little assistance. In spite of all this, Sevastyanov's intuition did not fail him.

A sawed-off shotgun fell from beneath the dead man's coat, and a Browning pistol was found in his pocket. He had more than enough identification papers.

How should we regard this positive proof of a sixth sense? Another minute, and Sevastyanov himself would have been shot. But what if he had killed an innocent man?

The criminals had neither the strength nor the desire to return to the mainland. Having weighed all the pros and cons, they decided not to take any chances but to limit their activities to reorganizing their lives in this new environment. This was, of course, a rational decision. The thugs viewed escape attempts as bold adventures, but unnecessary risks.

Who would make a run for it? A peasant? A priest? I met only one priest who had attempted to escape – and that was before the famous meeting where Patriarch Sergei handed Bullitt, the first American ambassador, a list of all Orthodox priests serving sentences throughout the Soviet Union. Patriarch Sergei had had the opportunity to acquaint himself with the cells of Butyr Prison when he was Metropolitan. As a result of Roosevelt's intervention, all members of the clergy were released in a body from

imprisonment and exile. The intention was to arrange a certain ‘concordat’ with the church – an essential step in view of the approaching war.

Perhaps it would be a common criminal who would attempt to escape – a child-molester, an embezzler, a bribe-taker, a murderer? But there was no sense in these people’s attempting to escape, since their sentences (which were called ‘terms’ in Dostoevsky’s time) were short, and they were given easy service jobs. In general they had no difficulty in obtaining positions of privilege in the camp administration. Workdays were generously credited to them and – most important – they were well treated when they returned to their home towns and villages. This kindness could not be explained away as the Russian people’s capacity to pity the ‘unfortunate’. That attitude had long since become a thing of the past, a charming fairy tale. Times had changed, and the great discipline of the new society demanded that ‘the simple people’ copy the attitude of the authorities in such matters. This attitude was usually favorable, since common criminals did not trouble the government. Only ‘Trotskyites’ and ‘enemies of the people’ were to be hated.

There was another significant factor that might explain the indifference of the populace to those who had returned from the prisons. So many people had spent time in prison that there probably was not a family in the country in which some family member or friend had not been ‘repressed’. Once the saboteurs had been eliminated, it was the turn of the well-to-do peasants, who were called *kulaks* (the term meaning ‘fist’). After the *kulaks* came the ‘Trotskyites’, and the ‘Trotskyites’ were followed by persons with German surnames. Then a crusade against the Jews was on the point of being declared. All this reduced people to total indifference toward anyone who had been marked by any part of the criminal code.

Earlier, anyone who had returned from prison to his native village inspired in others guarded feelings (concealed or openly displayed) of animosity, contempt, or sympathy, while now no one paid any attention to such persons. The moral isolation of those marked as convicts had long since disappeared.

Former prisoners were met in the most hospitable fashion – provided their return had been sanctioned by the authorities. Any child-molester and rapist who had infected his young victim with syphilis could count on enjoying full freedom of action in those same circles where he had once ‘overstepped’ the bounds of the criminal code.

The fictionalized treatment of legal categories played a significant role in this regard. For some reason writers and dramatists wrote many works having to do with the theory of law. The law book of the prisons and camps, however, remained locked up under seven seals. No serious conclusions that might touch upon the heart of the matter were reached on the basis of service reports.

Why should the criminal element in camp have attempted to escape? The idea was remote from their minds, and they relinquished their fates totally to the camp administration. In view of all these circumstances, Paul Krivoshei's escape was all the more remarkable.

Krivoshei's name meant 'crooked neck' in Russian. He was a stocky, short-legged man with a thick red neck that was all apiece with the back of his head. His name was no accident.

A chemical engineer from a factory in Kharkov, he spoke several foreign languages perfectly, read a great deal, had a good knowledge of painting and sculpture, and a large collection of antiques.

A prominent Ukrainian engineer, he did not belong to the Party and deeply despised all politicians. He was a clever and passionate man, but greed was not one of his vices. That would have been too crude and banal for Krivoshei, whose passion was for enjoying life as he understood it – indulging in relaxation and lust. Intellectual pleasures did not appeal to him. His culture and vast knowledge combined with material possessions provided him with many opportunities to satisfy his baser instincts and desires.

Krivoshei had studied painting simply to be able to enjoy a higher status among those who loved and appreciated art and not appear ignorant before the objects of his passion – be they male or female. Painting had never interested him in the slightest, but he considered it his obligation to have an opinion even on the square hall in the Louvre.

The same was true of literature, which he read primarily in French or English and primarily for language practice. In and of itself, literature was of little interest to him, and he could spend a virtual eternity reading a novel – one page a night before falling asleep. There cannot be a single book in this world that could have kept Krivoshei awake till morning. He guarded his sleep carefully, and no detective novel could have upset his even schedule.

Musically, Krivoshei was a total ignoramus. He had no ear, and he had never even heard of, much less felt, the sort of mystical reverence Blok had for music. Krivoshei had long since learned that the lack of a musical ear was ‘not a vice, but a misfortune’, and he was quite reconciled to his ill luck. In any case, he possessed sufficient patience to sit to the end of some fugue or sonata and thank the performer – particularly if it was a woman. He enjoyed excellent health and was of a plump, Pickwickian build, in other words a shape that threatened no one in camp.

Krivoshei was born in 1900. He always wore either horn-rimmed glasses or glasses with round lenses and no rims at all. Slow and unhurried in composure with a high, arched, receding brow, he presented an extremely imposing figure. This too was probably intentional; his sedate bearing impressed the supervisors and lightened his lot in camp.

A man with no feeling for art and lacking that excitement characteristic of both the creator and the user of art, Krivoshei became absorbed in the collecting of antiques. He devoted himself to this hobby totally and with passion, since it was both interesting and profitable, and gave him the opportunity to meet new people. And, of course, this pursuit lent a certain air of propriety to his baser interests. The salary paid an engineer at that time was insufficient to permit Krivoshei to lead the opulent life of an antiques enthusiast. He lacked the means and could obtain them only by embezzling. There was no denying that Krivoshei was a decisive personality.

He was sentenced to be shot, but the sentence was commuted to ten years – an enormous punishment for the middle thirties. His property was confiscated and sold at auction, but Krivoshei had foreseen the possibility of such an outcome. It would have been strange indeed if he had not been able to conceal a few hundred thousand rubles. The risk was small and the calculation simple. As a common criminal and therefore a ‘friend of the people’, he would serve no more than half his sentence, accumulate workday credits or benefit from an amnesty, and then be free to spend the money he had salted away.

Krivoshei was not kept for long in the mainland camp, however, but was sent to Kolyma because of his heavy sentence. This complicated his plans. True, his confidence in the benefits of a criminal sentence (as opposed to a political one) and the manners of a member of the landed gentry was totally justified, and Krivoshei never spent a day in a work gang at the mines. He

was sent to work as a chemical engineer in a laboratory in the Arkagalinsk coal region.

At that time the famous gold strike at Chai-Urinsk had not yet been made, and ancient larch trees and six-hundred-year-old poplars were still standing on the sites of numerous future settlements with thousands of residents. No one believed then that the nuggets of the At-Uriakhsk Valley could either be exhausted or surpassed, and life had not yet migrated northwest to Oimyakon, then the North Pole of cold. Old mines were exhausted, and new ones opened. Everything at the mines is always temporary.

The entire coal basin of Arkagala, which was ultimately to become the basic source of heating-fuel for the region, was at that time only an outpost for gold prospectors. The ceilings of the mines' galleries were low enough to touch if one stood on a rail. They had been dug economically, 'taiga-style' in the expression of the camp supervisors, with pick and axe – like all the roads of Kolyma that extend for thousands of miles. These early mines are precious relics that hearken back to a time when the only other tool had 'two handles and one wheel'. Convict labor is cheap.

Geological prospecting groups were not yet choking in the gold of Susuman and Upper At-Uriakhsk.

Krivoshei, however, clearly realized that the paths of geologists would lead them to the outskirts of Arkagala and thence to Yakutsk. The geologists would be followed by carpenters, miners, guards… He had to hurry.

Several months passed, and Krivoshei's wife arrived in Kharkov. She had not come to visit him, but had followed her husband, duplicating the feat of the Decembrists' wives. Krivoshei's wife was neither the first nor the last of such 'Russian heroines'.

These wives had to resign themselves both to the cold and to the constant torment of following their husbands, who were transferred periodically from place to place. The wife would have to abandon the job she had found with such difficulty and move to an area where it was dangerous for a woman to travel alone, where she might be subject to rape, robbery, mockery… Even without such journeys, however, none of these female martyrs could escape the crude sexual demands of the camp authorities – from the highest director to the guards, who had already had a taste of life in Kolyma. All women without exception were asked to join the drunken bachelor parties. Female convicts were simply commanded to: 'Undress

and lie down!’ They were infected with syphilis without any romancing or poems from Pushkin or Shakespeare. Treatment of convicts’ wives was even freer, since they were considered legally independent persons, and there was no article in the criminal code to protect them. If a camp supervisor were to rape a female convict, he always risked being informed upon by a friend or a competitor, a subordinate or a superior.

Worst of all – the whole colossal journey was meaningless, since the poor women were not permitted to visit their husbands. A promise to permit such a visit was always a weapon in the hands of a potential seducer.

Some wives brought with them from Moscow permission to visit their husbands once a month, on the condition that the husbands fulfill their production quotas and that their conduct be above reproach. The wives were not permitted to stay the night, of course, and the visit had to take place in the presence of a camp supervisor.

A wife almost never succeeded in obtaining work in the same settlement in which her husband was serving his sentence. On the rare occasions when a wife did manage to get a job close to her husband, the husband was immediately transferred to some different place. This was not a form of amusement invented by the camp supervisors, but official instructions: ‘Orders are orders.’ Such instances had been foreseen by Moscow.

Wives were not permitted to send any food to their husbands. There were all sorts of orders, quotas, and instructions that regulated the food ration according to work and conduct.

Could the guards not be asked to slip him some bread? The guards would be afraid of violating instructions. The camp director? He would agree, but she would have to pay with her own body. He didn’t need money, since he had long since been receiving a quadruple salary. Even so, it was highly unlikely that such a woman would have money for bribes – especially on the scale practiced in Kolyma. Such was the hopeless situation of the convicts’ wives. Moreover, if the husband had been convicted as ‘an enemy of the people’, there was absolutely no need to stand on ceremony with her. Any outrage committed on her person was considered a service to the country, a feat of valor, or at the very least a positive political action.

Many of the wives had arrived under three-year work contracts, and they had to wait in that trap for a return passage to the mainland.

Those who were strong in spirit (and they needed more strength than their convict husbands) waited for their contracts to end and left, never

having seen their husbands. The weak ones remembered the persecutions of the mainland and were afraid to return. They lived in an atmosphere of debauchery, drunkenness, hangovers, and big money. They married again – and again – bore children and abandoned both their husbands and themselves.

As might have been expected, Paul Krivoshei's wife was not able to get a job in Arkagala. She spent a short time there and left for the capital of the area – Magadan. A housewife with no skills, she got a job as a bookkeeper, found a place to sleep, and arranged her life in Magadan, where things were more cheerful than in the taiga at Arkagala.

But secret telegraph lines carried a cable from Arkagala to the Magadan chief of criminal investigations. His office was situated on virtually the only street in town, close to the barracks where Krivoshei's wife was staying and which had been partitioned up into living quarters 'for families'. The cable was in code: 'Escaped: Convict, Paul Krivoshei, born 1900, Article 168, sentence 10, case number…'

They thought that Krivoshei's wife was hiding him. She was arrested, but they couldn't get anything out of her. Yes, she had been to Arkagala, seen him, left, and was working in Magadan. A long search and observation produced no results. Departing ships and planes were checked with special thoroughness, but it was all in vain; there was no trace of Krivoshei.

Krivoshei set off toward Yakutsk, away from the sea. He took nothing with him but a canvas raincoat, a geologist's hammer, a pouch with a small quantity of geological 'samples', a supply of matches, and some money.

He made his way openly and unhurriedly along deer runs and the paths of pack animals, staying close to settlements and camps, never going far into the taiga. He spent each night in a tent or a hut. At the first small Yakut village he hired workers and had them dig test pits. That is, he had them do the very same work that he himself had formerly done for real geologists. Krivoshei knew enough about geology to pass himself off as a collector. Arkagala, where he had previously worked, was a final base camp for geological prospecting groups, and Krivoshei had managed to pick up their habits. His methodical manners, horn-rimmed glasses, daily shave, and trimmed nails inspired endless confidence.

Krivoshei was in no hurry. He filled his log with mysterious signs similar to those he had seen in geological field books and slowly moved toward Yakutsk.

On occasion he would turn back, stray off in a different direction, permit himself to be detained. All this was essential for him to ‘study the basin of the Riaboi Spring’ and for verisimilitude – to cover his tracks. Krivoshei had iron nerves and a pleasant outgoing smile.

In a month he had crossed the Yablonovy mountain chain with two Yakut bearers who were sent along with him by a collective farm to carry his ‘sample’ pouches. When they reached Yakutsk, Krivoshei deposited his rocks at the baggage section on the wharf and set off to the local geological office to ask that several valuable packages be sent to the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Krivoshei then went to the bathhouse and to the barber. He bought an expensive suit, several fashionable shirts, and some underwear. He then set off with a good-natured smile to visit the head of the local scientific society, where he was received in the most friendly fashion. His knowledge of foreign languages created a convincing impression.

Finding in Krivoshei an educated person (a rarity in Yakutsk), the directors of the local scientific society asked him to stay on a while longer. They countered his flustered protest that he had to hurry on to Moscow with a promise to pay his passage to Irkutsk at government expense. Krivoshei thanked them with dignity, but replied that he really had to be on his way. The society, however, had its own plans for Krivoshei.

‘Surely you won’t refuse, dear colleague, to give two or three lectures… on… any topic of your choice. For example, coal deposits in the Middle-Yakut Plateau?’

Krivoshei felt a knot form in the pit of his stomach.

‘Oh, of course, with pleasure. Within limits… you understand, without approval from Moscow…’ Krivoshei fell into profuse compliments of the scientific activity in the town of Yakutsk.

No criminal investigator could have put a more wily question to Krivoshei than had this Yakut professor, who was so favorably impressed by his scholarly guest, with his courteous bearing, and his horn-rimmed glasses. The professor, of course, merely intended to do a service to his home town.

The lecture took place and even gathered a considerable audience. Krivoshei smiled, quoted Shakespeare in English, sketched something on the blackboard and ran through dozens of foreign names.

‘These Muscovites don’t know much,’ the man who had been sitting next to the Yakut professor said during the break. ‘Any schoolboy knows about

the geological side of his talk. As for those chemical analyses of coal, that has nothing to do with geology. The only thing bright about him is his glasses.'

'You're wrong,' the professor frowned. 'What he says is very useful; besides, our colleague from the capital has a gift for popularization. We should have him repeat his lecture for the students.'

'Well, maybe for the freshmen,' the man continued obstinately.

'Stop it. After all, it's a favor. You don't look a gift horse…'

Krivoshei kindly agreed to repeat the lecture for the students, and it met with considerable success.

And so the scientific organizations of Yakutsk paid for their Moscow guest's ticket to Irkutsk.

His collections – several crates packed with stones – had been shipped off earlier. In Irkutsk 'the director of the geological expedition' managed to have his rocks sent by post to Moscow, to the Academy of Sciences, where they were received and lay for years in the warehouse, an unresolved scientific mystery. It was assumed that this mysterious shipment must have been collected by some insane geologist who had forgotten his field and even his name in some unknown polar tragedy.

'The amazing thing,' Krivoshei later said, 'was that no one anywhere asked to see my identification papers – not in the migrating village councils or in the highest scientific bodies. I had all the necessary papers, but no one ever asked for them.'

Naturally, Krivoshei never showed so much as his nose in Kharkov. He stopped at Mariupol, bought a house there, and used his false documents to get a job.

Exactly two years later, on the anniversary of his hike, Krivoshei was arrested, tried, again sentenced to ten years, and returned to Kolyma to serve out his time.

What was the mistake that canceled out this truly heroic feat, which had simultaneously demanded amazingly strong nerves, intelligence, and physical strength?

In the scrupulousness of its preparation, the depth of its concept and the psychological calculation that was its very cornerstone, this escape had no precedent.

An unusually small number of persons had taken part in its organization, but it was precisely this aspect that guaranteed its success. The escape was

also remarkable because in this land of Yakuts where local residents were promised twenty pounds of flour for each captured escapee, a single person had challenged a whole state with its thousands of armed men. Twenty pounds of flour had been the tariff in czarist times, and this reward was officially accepted even now. Krivoshei had to look on everyone as informers and cowards, but he had struggled and won!

What error had destroyed the plan that he had so brilliantly conceived and carried out?

His wife was detained in the north and had not been permitted to return to the mainland. The same organization that was investigating her husband was also in charge of issuing travel papers.

This, however, they had foreseen, and she was prepared to wait. Month followed month, and her request was refused without explanation. She made an attempt to leave from the other end of Kolyma – by plane over the same taiga rivers and valleys through which her husband passed on foot. But, of course, she was refused there as well. She was locked up in an enormous stone prison one-eighth the size of the Soviet Union, and she could not find a way out.

She was a woman, and she became weary of this eternal struggle with a person whose face she couldn't see, a person who was stronger than she – stronger and more wily.

She had spent the money she had brought with her, and life in the north was expensive. At the Magadan bazaar one apple costs a hundred rubles. So she got a job, but the salaries of persons hired locally, and not 'recruited' on the mainland, differed little from those in Kharkov.

Her husband had often said to her: 'Wars are won by strong nerves', and during those sleepless white polar nights she would whisper to herself these words of a German general. She felt her nerves were giving out. The stillness of nature, the deaf wall of human indifference, her complete uncertainty and fear for her husband exhausted her. For all she knew, he might have died of hunger along the way. He could have been killed by other escaped convicts, or shot by the guards, but she joyously concluded from the constant attention to her person on the part of a certain Institution that her husband had not 'been caught' and that her sufferings would be justified.

She wanted to confide in someone, but who would understand her, advise her? She knew little of the Far North, and she ached to lighten that terrible

burden on her soul that seemed to grow with every day, with every hour.

But in whom could she confide? In everyone she met she sensed a spy, an informer, an observer, and her intuition did not deceive her. All her acquaintances in all the settlements and towns of Kolyma had been called in and warned by the Institution. All of them waited anxiously for her to speak openly.

In the second year she made several attempts by mail to re-establish her contacts with her acquaintances in Kharkov. All her letters were copied and forwarded to the Kharkov Institution.

By the end of her second year of imprisonment, this desperate half-beggar knew only that her husband was alive. She sent letters addressed to him poste restante to all the major cities of the USSR.

In response she received a money order and after that five or six hundred rubles each month. Krivoshei was too clever to send the money from Mariupol, and the Institution was too experienced not to understand this. The map used in such instances to indicate ‘operations’ is like the maps used in military headquarters. The places from which money orders had been sent to the addressee in the Far North were indicated by flags, and each place was a railroad station to the north of Mariupol. There were no two flags in the same place. The Office of Investigations was now obliged to turn its efforts to compiling a list of persons who had moved to Mariupol on a permanent basis in the last two years, compare photographs…

That was how Krivoshei was arrested. His wife had been a bold and loyal aide. It was she who had brought him the identification papers and money – more than 50,000 rubles.

As soon as Krivoshei was arrested, she was immediately permitted to leave. Morally and physically exhausted, she left Kolyma on the first boat.

Krivoshei himself served a second sentence as head of the chemical laboratory in the Central Prison Hospital, where he enjoyed certain small privileges from the administration and continued to despise and fear the politicals. As before, he was extremely cautious in his conversations and even took fright if someone made political comments in his presence. His extreme cautiousness and cowardice had a different cause from that of the usual philistine-coward. Things political were of no interest to him, for he knew that a high price was exacted in the camp for the ‘crime’ of making political statements. He simply had no desire to sacrifice his material and

physical comfort. It had nothing to do with his intellectual or spiritual view of life.

Krivoshei lived in the laboratory instead of the camp barracks. This was permitted only to privileged prisoners. His clean, regulation cot nestled behind cupboards containing acids and alkalis. It was rumored that he engaged in some unusual form of debauchery in his cave and that even the Irkutsk prostitute, Sonya, was astounded by his knowledge and abilities in this respect. This may not have been the case at all, and such rumors may have been a total fabrication. There were more than enough female civilian employees who wanted to be ‘romanced’ by Krivoshei, a handsome man. He, however, always declined such advances carefully and insistently. They were too risky and carried too high a punishment, and he liked his comfort.

Krivoshei accumulated credits for workdays, no matter how few they might have been, and in a few years was released from camp, but without the right to leave Kolyma. This last circumstance did not trouble him in the slightest. On the day following his release he appeared in an expensive suit, an imported raincoat, and a well-made velour hat.

He obtained a position at one of the factories as a chemical engineer. He really was a specialist on high pressures. He worked for a week and asked for leave ‘because of family circumstances’.

’???’

‘I’m going for a woman,’ Krivoshei explained with a slight smile. ‘I’m going to find a woman at the bride’s market at the Elgen Collective Farm. I want to get married.’ He returned that very evening with a woman.

Near the Elgen Collective Farm, where only women prisoners worked, there was a filling-station. It was in the woods, at the edge of the settlement. Barrels of gasoline stood among the rose willow and alder shrubs, and it was here that the ‘freed’ women of Elgen gathered every evening. Truckloads of ‘suitors’ – yesterday’s convicts – would come in search of a bride. Courtship was a hurried affair – like everything in Kolyma (except the sentences), and the trucks would return with the newly-weds. If necessary, people could get to know each other in greater detail in the bushes, which were sufficiently large and thick.

In the winter all this would take place in private homes and apartments. Bride-picking naturally took much more time in the winter than in summer.

‘But how about your former wife?’

‘We don’t correspond.’

There was no sense trying to find out if this was true or not. Krivoshei could have given the magnificent camp reply: ‘If you don’t believe it, take it as a fairy tale.’

There was a time in the twenties, during the nebulous youth of the camps and those few ‘zones’ which were called concentration camps, when escape attempts were not considered a crime nor punished by an additional sentence. It seemed natural that the prisoner should attempt to escape, and it was the duty of the guards to catch him. Such relations between two groups of people both separated and linked by the prison bars seemed totally normal. Those were romantic days, when, in the expression of Musset, ‘the past no longer existed, but the future had not yet arrived’. It was only yesterday that the Cossack leader and future White general, Krasnov, was captured and released on his own recognisance. Mainly, it was a time when the limits of Russian patience had not yet been tested, had not yet been stretched to infinity – as was to happen later in the second half of the thirties.

The criminal code of 1926 had not yet been written with its notorious Article 16 (permitting criminal prosecution of acts not classified as crimes, but viewed as being ‘analogous’ to a crime), and Article 35 envisaged the use of internal exile as a form of punishment and created an entire social category of ‘thirty-fivers’.

When the first camps were set up, their legal footing was rather shaky. They required a lot of improvisation and, therefore, there was much arbitrariness on a local level. The notorious Solovetsk ‘smoke-house’, where convicts were forced to stand on stumps in the taiga to be eaten by the incredible Siberian mosquitoes, was an empirical experiment. The empirical principle was a bloody one, since the experiments were conducted on living material, human beings. The authorities could approve such methods as the ‘smoke-house’, and then the practice would be written into camp law, instructions, orders, directives. Or the experiment might be disallowed, and in such instances those responsible for the ‘smoke-house’ were tried by a military tribunal. But then, there were no long sentences at that time. The entire Fourth Division of the Solovki Prison had only two prisoners with ten-year sentences, and everyone pointed them out as if they were movie stars. One was the former colonel of the czarist gendarmerie, Rudenko, and the other was Marianov, an officer of the White Army in the

Far East. A five-year sentence was considered lengthy, and most were for two or three years.

In those years – up to the beginning of the thirties – there was no additional sentence for an escape. If you got away, you were in luck; if they caught you *alive*, you were also in luck. It was not often that escaped convicts were returned alive; the convicts' hatred for the guards developed the latters' taste for human blood. The prisoner feared for his life – especially during transfers, when a careless word said to the guards could purchase a ticket to the next world, 'to the moon'. Stricter rules were in effect during transfers of prisoners, and the guards could get away with a lot. During such transfers prisoners often demanded that their hands be tied behind their backs as a form of life insurance. The hope was that if this was done the guards would be reluctant to 'write off' a prisoner and then fill in his death certificate with the sacramental phrase: 'killed during attempt to escape'.

Investigations of such instances were always conducted in a slipshod fashion, and if the murderer was smart enough to fire a second shot in the air, the investigation always produced a conclusion favorable to him. The instruction prescribed a warning shot.

At Vishera, which was the Fourth Division of SLON and the Urals branch of the Solovetsk camps, the commandant, Nesterov, would personally receive recaptured prisoners. He was a heavy-set man with dense black hair that grew on the backs of his long, white hands and even seemed to cover his palms.

The dirty, hungry, beaten, exhausted escapees were coated from head to foot with a thick layer of road dust. They would be brought to Nesterov and thrown at his feet.

'All right, come closer.'

The prisoner would approach him.

'Decided to take a stroll? That's fine, just fine!'

'Forgive me, Ivan Spiridonych.'

'I'll forgive you,' Nesterov would say in a solemn sing-song voice as he got up from his seat on the porch. 'I'll forgive you, but the state won't forgive…'

His blue eyes would become milky and lined with red veins. His voice, however, remained kind and well disposed.

'Take your pick – a smack or isolation.'

‘A smack, Ivan Spiridonych.’

Nesterov’s hairy fist would soar at the head of the happy convict, who would wipe away the blood and spit out his broken teeth.

‘Get off to the barracks!’

Nesterov could knock anyone off his feet with one punch, and he prided himself on this famous talent. The returned prisoner too would consider the arrangement to his advantage, since his punishment went no further than Nesterov’s punch.

If the prisoner refused to resolve the matter family-style and insisted on the official punishment, he was locked up in an isolation cell with an iron floor, where two or three months of reduced rations was considerably worse than Nesterov’s ‘smack’.

If the escaped prisoner survived, there were no other unpleasant consequences – aside from the fact that he could no longer count on being lucky when prisoners were being selected for release to ‘unload’ camp.

As the camps grew, the number of escapes also increased, and simply hiring more guards was not effective. It was too expensive, and at that time very few people were interested in the job of camp guard. The question of responsibility for an escape attempt was being resolved in an inadequate, childish fashion.

Soon a new resolution was announced from Moscow: the days a convict spent on the run and the period he passed in a punishment cell after capture were not to be counted into his basic sentence.

This order caused considerable discontent in Bookkeeping. They had to increase personnel, for such complex arithmetical calculations were too much for our camp accountants.

The order was implemented and read aloud to the entire camp during head counts.

Alas, it did not frighten the would-be escapees at all.

Every day the ‘escaped’ column grew in the reports of the company commanders, and the camp director frowned more and more as he read these daily reports.

Kapitonov, a musician in the camp band, was one of the camp director’s favorites. He walked out of the camp, using his gleaming cornet as if it were a pass, and left the instrument hanging on the branch of a fir. At that point the camp head lost his composure altogether.

In late fall three convicts were killed during an escape. After the bodies were identified, the head of the camp ordered that they be exhibited for three days beside the camp gates – so that everyone had to pass them when leaving for work. But even this unofficial sharp reminder neither stopped nor even lessened the number of escapes.

All this took place toward the end of the twenties. Later came the notorious ‘reforging’ of men’s souls and the White Sea Canal. The ‘concentration camps’ were renamed ‘Corrective Labor Camps’, the number of prisoners grew exponentially, and escapes were treated as separate crimes: Article 82 of the 1926 criminal code laid down a punishment of one year, to be added on to the basic sentence.

All this took place on the mainland, but in Kolyma – a camp that had existed since 1932 – the question of escapees was dealt with only in 1938. From then on, the punishment for an escape was increased, and the ‘term’ was expanded to three years.

Why are the Kolyma years 1932–7 not included in the chronicle of escapes? At that time the camps were run by Edward Berzin. He had founded the Kolyma camp system and was the supreme authority where Party activity, governmental affairs and union matters were concerned. He was executed in 1938 and ‘rehabilitated’ in 1956. The former secretary of Dzerzhinsky and commander of a division of Latvian soldiers who exposed the famous conspiracy of Lokkar, Edward Berzin attempted – not without success – to solve the problem of colonizing this severe and isolated region and the allied problem of reforging the souls of the convicts. A man with a ten-year sentence could accumulate enough work credits to be released in two or three years. Under Berzin there was excellent food, a workday of four to six hours in the winter and ten in the summer, and colossal salaries for convicts, which permitted them to help their families and return to the mainland as well-to-do men when their sentences were up. Berzin did not believe in the possibility of reforging the professional criminals, since he knew their base, untrustworthy human material all too well. It was extremely difficult for professional criminals to be sent to Kolyma in the early years. Those who did succeed in being sent there never regretted it afterward.

The cemeteries dating back to those days are so few in number that the early residents of Kolyma seemed immortal to those who came later. No

one attempted to escape from Kolyma at that time; it would have been insane…

Those few years are the golden age of Kolyma. The horrible Yezhov, who was a true enemy of the people, spoke indignantly of the period at one of the meetings of the Central Committee shortly before unleashing his own wave of terror that was to be christened the ‘Yezhovshchina’.

It was in 1938 that Kolyma was transformed into a special camp for recidivists and Trotskyites, and escapes began to be punished with three-year sentences.

‘Why did you escape? You couldn’t have had a compass or a map?’

‘We did it anyway. Alexander promised to be our guide…’

They were being held at a transit prison. There were three of them who had unsuccessfully tried to escape: Nicholas Karev, a twenty-five-year-old former Leningrad journalist, Fyodor Vasiliev, a bookkeeper from Rostov who was the same age, and Alexander Kotelnikov, a Kamchatka Eskimo and reindeer-driver who had been arrested for stealing government property. Kotelnikov must have been about fifty years old, but he could have been a lot older, since it is hard to tell the age of a Yakut, Kamchadal, or Evenk. Kotelnikov spoke good Russian, but he couldn’t pronounce the Russian ‘sh’ and always replaced it with ‘s’ as did all the dialect speakers of the Chukotsk Peninsula. He knew who Pushkin and Nekrasov were, had been in Khabarovsk, and was an experienced traveler. He was a romantic by nature, judging by the gleam in his eye.

It was he who volunteered to lead his young friends out of confinement.

‘I told them America was closer and that we should head in that direction, but they wanted to make it to the mainland, so I gave in. We had to reach the Chukchi Eskimos, the migrating ones who were here before the Russians came. We didn’t make it.’

They were gone for only four days. They had left in the middle of September, in boots and summer clothing, certain they would have no difficulty in reaching the Chukchi camps, where Kotelnikov had assured them they would find friendship and assistance. But it snowed – a thick, early snow. Kotelnikov entered an Evenk village to buy deerskin boots. He bought the boots, and by evening a patrol caught up with them.

‘The Tungus are traitors, enemies,’ Kotelnikov fumed.

The old reindeer-driver had offered to lead Karev and Vasiliev out of the taiga without expecting any payment whatsoever. He was not particularly grieved by his new three-year ‘add-on’.

‘They’ll send me to the mines as soon as spring comes. I’ll just take off again.’

To shorten the time, he taught Karev and Vasiliev the Chukotsk language of the Kamchatka Peninsula. It was Karev, of course, who had initiated the whole affair. He cut a theatrical figure – even in this prison setting – and his modulated, velvet-toned voice betrayed his frivolousness. It couldn’t even have been called adventurousness. With each passing day he understood better the futility of the attempt, became moody, and weakened.

Vasiliev was simply a good soul ready to share his friend’s fate. Their escape attempt had taken place during the *first* year of their imprisonment, while they still had illusions… and physical strength.

Twelve cans of meat disappeared on a ‘white’ summer night from the tent-kitchen of a geological prospecting group. The loss was highly mysterious, since all forty employees and technologists were civilians with good salaries who had little need to steal cans of meat. Even if these cans had been worth some fantastic sum, there was no one to buy them in this remote, endless forest. The ‘bear’ explanation was immediately rejected, since nothing else in the kitchen had been touched. It was suggested that someone might have been trying to get even with the cook, who was in charge of the food. But the cook was a genial sort who denied that he had a secret enemy among the forty men. To check the matter out, the foreman, Kasaev, armed two of the stronger men with knives and set out with them to examine the area. He himself took with him the only weapon in camp – a small-caliber rifle. The surrounding area consisted of gray-brown ravines devoid of the slightest trace of greenery. They led to a limestone plateau. The geologist’s camp was located in a sort of pit on the green shore of a creek.

It did not take long to find out what had happened. In about two hours the party leisurely climbed a plateau, and a worker with particularly good eyesight stretched out his hand: a moving point could be made out on the horizon. The search party went along the ridge of slippery tuff, young stone that had not yet completely formed. This young tuff is similar to white butter and has a repulsive, salty taste. A man’s foot will sink into it as if into

a swamp, and when a boot is dipped in this semi-liquid, buttery stone, it is covered by a white paint-like substance.

It was easy to walk along the ridge, and they caught up with the man in about an hour and a half. He was dressed in the shreds of an old pea jacket and quilted pants with the knees missing. Both pant legs had been cut off to make footwear, which had already worn to shreds. The man had also cut off the sleeves of the pea jacket to wrap around his feet. His leather or rubber boots had evidently been long since worn through on the stones and branches and had been abandoned.

The man had a shaggy beard and was pale from unendurable suffering. He had diarrhea, terrible diarrhea. Eleven untouched cans of meat lay next to him on the rocks. One can had been broken open and eaten the day before.

He had been trying to make his way to Magadan for a month and was circling in the forest like a man rowing a boat in a deep lake-fog. He had lost all sense of direction and was walking at random when, totally exhausted, he came upon the camp. He had been catching field mice and eating grass. He had managed to hold out until the previous day when he noticed the smoke of our fire. He waited for night, took the cans, and crawled up on to the plateau by morning. He also took matches from the kitchen, but there was no need for them. He ate the meat, and his dry mouth and terrible thirst forced him to descend the ravine to the creek. There he drank and drank the cold, delicious water. The next day his face was all puffed up, and a gastric cramp robbed him of his last strength. He was glad that his journey was over – no matter in what fashion.

Captured at that very same camp was another escapee, an important person of some kind. One of a group who had escaped from a neighboring mine, robbing and killing the mine director himself, this man was the last of the ten to be captured. Two were killed, seven caught, and this last member of the group was captured on the twenty-first day. He had no shoes, and the soles of his feet were cracked and bleeding. He said that he had eaten a tiny fish a week earlier. He had caught the fish in a dried-up stream, but it had taken him several hours, and he was debilitated by hunger. His face was swollen and drained of blood. The guards took considerable care with his diet and treatment. They even mobilized the camp medic and gave him strict orders to take special care of the prisoner. The man spent three days in camp, where he washed, ate his fill, got his hair cut, and shaved. Then he

was taken away by a patrol for questioning, after which he was undoubtedly shot. The man knew this would happen, but he had seen a lot in the camps, and his indifference had long since reached the stage where a man becomes a fatalist and swims with the current. The guards were with him the entire time and would not permit anyone to talk to him. Each evening he would sit on the porch of the bathhouse and watch the enormous cherry-red sunset. The light of the evening sun was reflected in his eyes and they seemed to be on fire – a beautiful sight.

Orotukan is a settlement in Kolyma with a monument to Tatyana Malandin, and the Orotukan Club bears her name. Tatyana Malandin was a civilian employee, a member of the Komsomol, who fell into the clutches of escaped professional criminals. She was robbed and raped ‘in chorus’ – in the loathsome expression of the criminal world. And she was murdered in the taiga, a few hundred yards from the village. This occurred in 1938, and the authorities vainly spread rumors that she had been murdered by ‘Trotskyites’. The absurdity of such a slander, however, was too obvious, and it enraged even Lieutenant Malandin, the uncle of the murdered girl. A camp employee, Malandin henceforth reversed his attitude to the criminals and the politicals in camp. From that time on he hated the former and did favors for the latter.

Both the men described above were recaptured when their strength was virtually exhausted. Another man conducted himself quite differently when he was detained by a group of workers on a path near the test pits. A heavy rain had been falling for three days, and several workers put on their raincoats and pants to check the small tent, which served as a kitchen; it contained food and cooking utensils. There was also a portable smithy with an anvil, a furnace, and a supply of drilling tools. The smithy and kitchen stood in the bed of a mountain creek, in a ravine about a mile and a half from the sleeping tents.

Mountain rivers easily burst their banks when it rains, and the weather was fully expected to pull its usual tricks. The sight that the men came upon, however, left them totally dumbfounded. Nothing remained. Where there had been a smithy with tools for the entire site – drills, bits, picks, shovels, blacksmith tools – there was nothing. Nor was there any kitchen with the summer’s food supply. There were no pots, no dishes – nothing.

The appearance of the ravine had been totally changed by new stones brought down from somewhere by the raging water. Everything had been carried off downstream, and the workers followed the river-banks for several miles, but did not find so much as a piece of iron. Much later, when the water had receded, an enameled bowl was found in the rose willows growing on the shore near the mouth of the creek. This crushed and twisted bowl filled with sand was all that was left after the storm and the spring flood.

Returning home, the workers came upon a man in canvas boots, wearing a soaked-through raincoat and carrying a bag over his shoulder.

‘Are you an escapee?’ Vaska Rybin, one of the ditch diggers of the expedition, asked the man.

‘That’s right,’ the man answered in a sort of semi-confirming tone. ‘I need to get dry…’

‘Come with us to our tent; we have a fire in the stove.’ In the rainy summer weather the stove was always kept hot. All forty men lived in the tent.

The man took off his boots, hung his footcloths next to the stove, pulled out a tin cigarette case, shook some cheap tobacco on to a scrap of newspaper, and lit up.

‘Where are you going in such a rain?’

‘To Magadan.’

‘Would you like something to eat?’

‘What do you have?’

The soup and pearl-barley kasha didn’t tempt the man. He untied his sack and took out a piece of sausage.

‘You know how to escape in style,’ Rybin said.

Vasily Kochetov, an older worker who was second-in-charge of the work gang, stood up.

‘Where are you going?’ Rybin asked him.

‘To get some air,’ Kochetov responded and stepped over the threshold of the tent.

Rybin smirked.

‘Listen,’ he said to the escaped prisoner. ‘Pick up your stuff and get off to wherever you’re going. He just went for the boss – to arrest you. Don’t worry, we don’t have soldiers, but you had better get on your way. Here’s

some bread, and take some tobacco. The rain seems to be letting up; you're in luck. Just keep heading for the big hill, and you can't go wrong.'

The escaped prisoner silently wrapped the dry ends of his wet footcloths around his feet, pulled on his boots, lifted his sack to his shoulder, and left.

About ten minutes later the piece of canvas that served as a door flung back, and the foreman, Kasaev, came in with a small-caliber rifle over his shoulder. With him were two other foremen, followed by Kochetov.

Kasaev stood silently while his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness of the tent. He looked around, but no one paid any attention to the newcomers. Everyone was busy with his own affairs – some were asleep, others were mending their clothing, others were whittling some complicated erotic figures from a log, and still others were playing the game *bura* with home-made cards.

Rybin was setting his charred pot, made from a tin can, on the glowing coals.

'Where is he?' Kasaev shouted.

'Gone,' Rybin answered calmly. 'Picked up his stuff and left. What did you want me to do – arrest him?'

'He got undressed,' Kochetov shouted. 'He wanted to sleep.'

'How about you? You went out to get some fresh air, and where did you scurry off to in the rain?'

'Let's go home,' Kasaev said. 'As for you, Rybin, you had better watch your step or things are going to go badly for you.'

'What can you do to me?' Rybin said, walking up to Kasaev. 'Sprinkle salt on my head? Or maybe cut my throat while I'm sleeping? Is that it?'

The foreman left.

This is one small lyric episode in the monotonously gloomy tale of men fleeing Kolyma.

The camp supervisor was worried by the number of escapees dropping in – three of them in one month. He requested that a guard post of armed soldiers be sent, but he was turned down. Headquarters was not willing to take on such expenditures on behalf of civilian employees, and they told him to take care of the matter, using the resources he already had at his disposal. By that time Kasaev's small-caliber rifle had been supplemented by two double-barreled, center-firing shotguns that were loaded with pieces of lead – as if for bear. Nevertheless, these guns were too unreliable to

count on if the camp were attacked by a group of hungry and desperate escapees.

The camp director was an experienced man, and he came up with the idea of building two guard towers similar to those in real forced labor camps. It was clever camouflage. The false guard towers were intended to convince escaped convicts that there were armed guards at the site.

Evidently the camp director's idea was successful; no escaped convicts appeared on the site after that, even though we were not much more than a hundred miles from Magadan.

The search for the 'first of all metals' – that is, for gold – shifted into the Chai-Urinsk Valley along the same path that Krivoshei had taken. When that happened, dozens fled into the forest. From there it was closer than ever to the mainland, but the authorities were well aware of this fact. The number of secret guard posts was dramatically increased, and the hunt for escaped convicts reached its peak. Squadrons of soldiers combed the taiga, rendering totally impossible 'release by the green procurator' – the popular phrase used to describe escapes. The 'green procurator' freed fewer and fewer prisoners, and finally stopped freeing anyone at all.

Recaptured prisoners were killed on the spot, and the morgue at Arkagala was packed with bodies being held for identification by the fingerprint service.

The Arkagala coalmine near the settlement of Kadykchan was famous for its coal deposits. The coal seams were as thick as eight, thirteen, or even twenty-one yards. About six miles from the mine was a military 'outpost'. The soldiers slept, ate, and were generally based there in the forest.

In the summer of 1940 the outpost was commanded by Corporal Postnikov, a man who hungered for murder and performed his job with eagerness and passion. He personally captured five escaped convicts and was awarded some sort of medal and a sum of money, as was the custom in such cases. The reward for the dead was the same as for the living, so there was no sense in delivering captured prisoners in one piece.

One pale August morning Postnikov ambushed an escaped convict who had come down to the river to drink. Postnikov shot and killed the prisoner with his Mauser, and it was decided not to drag the body back to the village but to abandon it in the taiga. There were a lot of bear and lynx tracks in the vicinity.

Postnikov took an axe and chopped off both hands at the wrist so that Bookkeeping could take fingerprints. He put the hands into his pouch and set off home to write up the latest report on a successful hunt.

The report was dispatched on the same day; one of the soldiers took the package and Postnikov gave the rest of the men the day off in honor of his good fortune.

That night the dead man got up and with the bloody stumps of his forearms pressed to his chest somehow reached the tent in which the convict-laborers lived. His face pale and drained of blood, he stood at the doorway and peered in with unusually blue, crazed eyes. Bent double and leaning against the door frame, he glared from under lowered brows and groaned. He was shaking terribly. Black blood spotted his quilted jacket, his pants, and his rubber boots. He was given some hot soup, and his terrible wrists were wrapped in rags. Fellow prisoners started to take him to the first-aid station, but Corporal Postnikov himself, along with some soldiers, came running from the hut that served as the outpost.

The soldiers took the man off somewhere – but not to the hospital or the first-aid station. I never heard anything more of the prisoner with the chopped-off hands.

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# *My First Tooth*

The column of men was just as I had dreamed all through my boyhood years. Everywhere were blackened faces and blue mouths burned by the Ural sun in April. Enormous guards leaped into sleighs which flew by without stopping. One of the guards had a single eye and a scar slash across his face. The head guard had bright-blue eyes and we all, all two hundred convicts, knew his name before half the first day had passed – Sherbakov. We learned it by magic, in some unfathomable, incomprehensible way. The convicts uttered his name in an offhand fashion as if it were something they had long been familiar with and this trip with him would last for ever. Indeed, he entered our lives for eternity. That is just the way it was – at least for many of us. Sherbakov's enormous, supple figure appeared briefly everywhere. He would run ahead of the column and meet it, and then follow the last cart with his eyes before rushing forward to catch up and overtake it. Yes, we had carts, the classic carts of Siberia. Our group was making a five-day march in convict file. We carried no special goods with us and whenever we stopped anywhere or had to be counted, our irregular ranks reminded one of recruits at a railway station. It would be a long time, however, before the paths of our lives led us to any railway stations. It was a crisp April morning, and our yawning, coughing group was mustered in the twilight of a monastery courtyard before setting out on the long journey.

The quiet, considerate Moscow guards had been replaced by a band of shouting, suntanned young men under the command of the blue-eyed Sherbakov, and we spent the night in the basement of the Solikamsk Police Station which was located in a former monastery. Yesterday, when they poured us into the cold basement, all we could see was ice and snow around the church. There was always a slight thaw in the day and in the evening it would freeze over again. Blue-gray drifts blanketed the entire yard, and to

find the essence of the snow, its whiteness, one had to break the hard, brittle crust of ice, dig a hole, and only then scoop out the flaky snow that melted joyously on the tongue and cooled dry mouths, burning them with its freshness.

I was one of the first to enter the basement and was thus able to pick a warmer spot. The enormous icy chambers frightened me, and I searched with all the inexperience of youth for something that would at least resemble a stove. But my chance comrade, a stunted thief by the name of Gusev, shoved me right up against the wall next to the only window, which was barred and had a double frame. Semicircular and about a yard high, the window began down at the floor and looked like a loophole. I wanted to find a warmer spot, but the crowd kept flowing through the narrow door and there was no opportunity to return. Very calmly, without saying a word to me, Gusev kicked the glass with the tip of his boot, breaking first one pane and then the second. Cold air rushed through the new opening, burning like boiling water. Caught in this icy draft and already terribly chilled after a long wait and head count in the courtyard, I began to shiver. Immediately, however, I understood the wisdom of Gusev's action. Of the two hundred convicts, we two were the only ones that night who breathed fresh air. People were so packed into the cellar that it was impossible to lie down or even to sit. We had to remain standing.

The upper half of the room was hidden by a white fog of breath – unclean and stuffy. The ceiling was invisible, and we had no idea if it was high or low. People began to faint. Choking for breath, men tried to push their way to the door, where there was a crack and a peep-hole. They tried to breathe through it but every now and again the sentry outside the door would shove his bayonet through this peep-hole, and the men didn't try again after that. Naturally, no medical assistance was rendered to those who fainted. Only the wise Gusev and I were able to breathe easily at the broken window. Muster took a long time…

We were the last to leave and, when the fog in the cellar had cleared, we saw within arm's reach a vaulted ceiling, the firmament of our church-prison. In the basement of the Solikamsk Police Station I found huge letters drawn with a lump of coal, stretching right across the vaulted ceiling: 'Comrades! We were in this grave three days and thought we would die, but we survived. Comrades, be strong!'

Accompanied by the shouts of the guards, our column crawled past the outskirts of Solikamsk and made its way toward a low area. The sky was blue, very blue – like the eyes of the guard commander. As the wind cooled our faces the sun burned them so that by nightfall of the first day they became brown. Accommodation, prepared in advance, was always the same. Two peasant huts were rented to put up the convicts for the night. One would be fairly clean, and the other rather dingy – something like a barn. Sometimes it was a barn. The trick was to end up in the ‘cleaner’ one, but that was not for the convicts to choose. Every evening at twilight the commander of the guards would have the men file past him. With a wave of his hand he would indicate where the man standing before him should spend the night. At the time Sherbakov seemed to me to be infinitely wise because he didn’t dig around in papers or lists to select ‘more distinguished criminals’, but simply picked out the necessary convicts with a wave of his hand. Later I decided that Sherbakov must be unusually observant; each selection, made by some unfathomable method, turned out to be the correct one. The political prisoners were all in one group, and the common criminals in the other. A year or two later I realized that Sherbakov’s wisdom did not depend on miracles. Anyone can learn to assess others by outward appearance. In our group, belongings and suitcases might have served as secondary signs, but our things were being hauled separately, on the carts and peasant sleighs.

On the first night something happened. That event is the subject of this story. Two hundred men stood waiting for the commander of the guards when, off to the left, a disturbance was heard. There was an uproar of shouting, puffing, and swearing, and finally a clear cry of ‘Dragons! Dragons!’ A man was flung out on to the snow in front of the file of convicts. His face was bloodied, and someone had jammed a tall fur hat on his head, but it could not cover the narrow oozing wound. The man, who was probably Ukrainian, was dressed in homespun. I knew him. He was Peter Zayats, the religious sectarian, and he had been brought from Moscow in the same railroad car with me. He prayed constantly.

‘He won’t stand up for roll-call!’ the guard reported, excited and puffing.

‘Stand him up!’ ordered the commander.

Two enormous guards supported Zayats, one on each side. Zayats, however, was heavier, and a head taller than either of them.

‘You don’t want to stand up? You don’t want to?’

Sherbakov struck Zayats in the face with his fist. Zayats spat into the snow.

All at once I felt a burning sensation in my chest and I realized that the meaning of my whole life was about to be decided. If I didn't do something – what exactly, I didn't know – it would mean that my arrival with this group of convicts was in vain, that twenty years of my life had been pointless.

The burning flush of shame over my cowardliness fled from my cheeks. I felt them cool down and my body lighten.

I stepped out of line and said in a trembling voice:

'How dare you beat that man!'

Sherbakov looked me over in sheer amazement.

'Get back in line.'

I returned to the line. Sherbakov gave the command, and heading for the two huts as indicated by his fingers, the group melted away in the darkness. His finger directed me to the poorer hut.

We lay down to sleep on wet, rotting year-old straw which was strewn on bare smooth earth. We lay in each other's embrace because it was warmer that way, and only the criminal element in the group played its eternal card-games beneath a lantern hanging from a ceiling beam. Soon even they fell asleep and so, mulling over my act, did I. I had no older friend, no one to set an example. My sleep was interrupted by someone shining a light in my face. One of my comrades, a thief, kept repeating in a confident, ingratiating voice:

'He's the one, he's the one.'

The lantern was held by a guard.

'Come on outside.'

'I'll get dressed right away.'

'Come as you are.'

I walked outside shivering nervously and not knowing what was going to happen.

Flanked by two guards, I walked up on to the porch.

'Take your underwear off!'

I undressed.

'Go stand in the snow.'

I went out into the snow, looked back at the porch, and saw two rifle barrels aimed directly at me. How much time I spent there that night in the

Urals, my first night in the Urals, I don’t remember.

I heard a command:

‘Get dressed.’

As I pulled on my underwear, a blow on the ear knocked me into the snow. A heavy boot struck me directly in the teeth, and my mouth filled with warm blood and began to swell.

‘Go back to the barracks!’

I went back to the hut and found my spot, but it was already occupied by another man. Everyone was asleep or pretending to be asleep. The salty taste of blood wouldn’t go away. There was some object in my mouth, something superfluous, and I gripped this superfluous thing and tore it forcibly from my mouth. It was a knocked-out tooth. I threw it on to the decaying straw on the earthen floor.

With both arms I embraced the dirty, stinking bodies of my comrades and fell asleep. I fell asleep and didn’t even catch cold.

In the morning the group got underway, and Sherbakov’s blue imperturbable eyes ranged calmly over the convict columns. Peter Zayats stood in line. No one beat him, and he wasn’t shouting about dragons. The common criminals in the group peered at me in a hostile, anxious fashion. In the camps every man learns to answer for himself.

Two days later we reached ‘headquarters’ – a new log house on the river-bank.

The commandant, Nestorov, came out to take over the group. He was a hairy-fisted man, and many of the criminals in the group knew him and praised him highly:

‘Whenever they brought in escapees, Nestorov would come out and say: ‘So you boys decided to come back! OK, take your pick – either a licking or solitary confinement.” Solitary had an iron floor, and no one could survive more than three months there, not to mention the investigation and the extra sentence. “A licking, sir.”

‘He’d wind up and knock the man off his feet! Then he’d knock him down again! He was a real expert. “Now go back to the barracks.” And that was all. No investigations. A good supervisor.’

Nestorov walked up and down the ranks, carefully examining the faces.

‘Any complaints against the guards?’

‘No, no,’ a ragged chorus of voices answered.

‘How about you?’ The hairy finger touched my chest. ‘How come you’re answering as if you had cotton wool in your mouth? And your voice is hoarse.’

‘No,’ I answered, trying to force my damaged mouth to enunciate the words as firmly as possible. ‘I have no complaints about the guards.’

‘That’s not a bad story,’ I said to Sazonov. ‘It’s even got a certain amount of literary sophistication. But you’ll never get it published. Besides, the ending is sort of amorphous.’

‘I have a different ending,’ Sazonov said. ‘A year later they made me a bigwig in camp. That was when there was all that talk about rehabilitation and the new society “reforging” men. Sherbakov was supposed to get the job of second-in-command of the section I worked in. A lot depended on me, and Sherbakov was afraid I still hadn’t forgotten about the tooth I’d lost. Sherbakov hadn’t forgotten it either. He had a large family, and it was a good job, right on top. He was a simple, direct man and came to see me to find out if I would object to his candidacy. He brought a bottle of vodka with him to make peace Russian-style, but I wouldn’t drink with him. I did tell him I wouldn’t interfere with his appointment.

‘Sherbakov was overjoyed, kept saying he was sorry, shifting from one foot to the other at my door, catching the rug with his heel and not able to bring the conversation to an end.

‘ “We were on the road, you understand. We had escaped prisoners with us.” ’

‘That’s not really a good ending either,’ I said to Sazonov.

‘I have a different one then.

‘Before I was appointed to the section where I met Sherbakov again, I saw Peter Zayats on the street. He was an orderly in the village. There was no trace of the former young, black-haired, black-browed giant. Instead he was a limping, gray-haired old man coughing up blood. He didn’t even recognize me, and when I took him by the arm and addressed him by name, he jerked back and went his own way. I could see from his eyes that Zayats was thinking his own thoughts, thoughts that I could not guess at. My appearance was either unnecessary or offensive to the master of such thoughts, who was conversing with less earthly personages.’

‘I don’t like that variation either,’ I said.

‘Then I’ll leave it as I originally had it.’

Even if you can’t get something published, it’s easier to bear a thing if you write it down. Once you’ve done that, you can forget…

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# *Prosthetic Appliances*

The camp's solitary confinement block was old, old. It seemed that all you had to do was to kick one of the wooden walls and its logs would collapse, disintegrate. But the block did not collapse and all seven cells did faithful service. Of course, any loudly spoken word could be heard by one's neighbors, but the inmates of the block were afraid of punishment. If the guard on duty marked the cell with a chalk X, the cell was deprived of hot food. Two Xs meant no bread as well. The block was used for camp offenses; anyone suspected of something more dangerous was taken away to Central Control.

For the first time all the prisoners entrusted with administrative work had suddenly been arrested. Some major affair, some camp trial was being put together. By someone's command.

Now all six of us were standing in the narrow corridor, surrounded by guards, feeling and understanding only one thing: that we had been caught by the teeth of that same machine as several years before and that we would learn the reason only tomorrow, no earlier.

We were all made to undress to our underwear and were led into a separate cell. The storekeeper recorded things taken for storage, stuffed them into sacks, attached tags, wrote. I knew the name of the investigator supervising the 'operation' – Pesniakevich.

The first man was on crutches. He sat down on a bench next to the lamp, put the crutches on the floor, and began to undress. He was wearing a steel corset.

'Should I take it off?'

'Of course.'

The man began to unlace the cords of the corset and the investigator Pesniakevich bent down to help him.

‘Do you recognize me, old friend?’ The question was asked in thieves’ slang, in a confidential manner.

‘I recognize you, Pleve.’

The man in the corset was Pleve, supervisor of the camp tailor shop. It was an important job involving twenty tailors who, with the permission of the administration, filled individual orders even from outside the camp.

The naked man turned over on the bench. On the floor lay the steel corset as the report of confiscated items was composed.

‘What’s this thing called?’ asked the block storekeeper, touching the corset with the toe of his boot.

‘A steel prosthetic corset,’ answered the naked man.

Pesniakevich went off to the side and I asked Pleve how he knew him.

‘His mother kept a whore-house in Minsk before the Revolution. I used to go there,’ Pleve answered coldly.

Pesniakevich emerged from the depths of the corridor with four guards. They picked Pleve up by his arms and legs and carried him into the cell. The lock snapped shut.

Next was Karavaev, manager of the stable. A former soldier of the famous Budyony Brigade, he had lost an arm in the Civil War.

Karavaev banged on the officer of the guards’ table with the steel of his artificial limb.

‘You bastards.’

‘Drop the metal. Let’s have the arm.’

Karavaev raised the untied limb, but the guards jumped the cavalryman and shoved him into the cell. There ensued a flood of elaborate obscenities.

‘Listen, Karavaev,’ said the chief guard of the block. ‘We’ll take away your hot food if you make a noise.’

‘To hell with your hot food.’

The head guard took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and made an X on Karavaev’s cell.

‘Who’s going to sign for the arm?’

‘No one. Put a check mark,’ commanded Pesniakevich.

Now it was the turn of our doctor, Zhitkov. A deaf old man, he wore a hearing-aid. After him was Colonel Panin, manager of the carpentry shop. A shell had taken off the colonel’s leg somewhere in East Prussia during the First World War. He was an excellent carpenter, and he explained to me that before the Revolution children of the nobility were often taught some hand

trade. The old man unsnapped his prosthetic leg and hopped into his cell on one leg.

There were only two of us left – Shor, Grisha Shor the senior brigade leader, and myself.

‘Look how cleverly things are going,’ Grisha said; the nervous mirth of the arrest was overtaking him. ‘One turns in a leg; another an arm; I’ll give an eye.’ Adroitly he plucked out his porcelain right eye and showed it to me in his palm.

‘You have an artificial eye?’ I said in amazement. ‘I never noticed.’

‘You are not very observant. But then the eye is a good match.’

While Grisha’s eye was being recorded, the chief guard couldn’t control himself and started giggling.

‘That one gives us his arm; this one turns in his leg; another gives his back, and this one gives his eye. We’ll have all the parts of the body at this rate. How about you?’ He looked over my naked body carefully.

‘What will you give up? Your soul?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘You can’t have my soul.’

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# *The Train*

At the train station in Irkutsk I lay down in the clear, sharp light of an electric bulb. All my money was sewn into a cotton belt that had been made for me in the shop two years earlier; the time had finally come for it to render service. Carefully, stepping over legs, selecting a path among the dirty, stinking, ragged bodies, a policeman patrolled the train station. Better still, there was a military patrol with red armbands and automatic rifles. There was no way the policeman could have controlled the criminals in the crowd, and this fact had probably been established long before my arrival at the train station. It was not that I was afraid my money would be stolen. I had lost any sense of fear much earlier. It was just that things were easier with money than without.

The light shone directly in my face, but lights had shone in my eyes thousands of times before and I had learned to sleep very well with the light on. I turned up the collar of my pea jacket, shoved my hands into the sleeves of the opposite arms, let my felt boots slip from my feet a little, and fell asleep. I wasn’t worried about drafts. Everything was familiar: the screech of the train whistle, the moving cars, the train station, the policeman, the bazaar next to the train station. It was as if I had just awakened from a dream that had lasted for years. And suddenly I was afraid and felt a cold sweat form on my body. I was frightened by the terrible strength of man, his desire and ability to forget. I realized I was ready to forget everything, to cross out twenty years of my life. And what years! And when I understood this, I conquered myself. I knew I would not permit my memory to forget everything that I had seen. And I regained my calm and fell asleep.

I woke, turned my foot rags so that the dry side was facing inward, and washed myself in the snow. Black splashes flew in all directions. Then I set

out for town – my first town in eighteen years. Yakutsk was a large village. The Lena River had receded far from the town, but the inhabitants feared its return, its floods, and the sandy field of the river-bed was empty, filled only by a snowstorm. Here in Irkutsk were large buildings, the hustle and bustle of people, stores.

I bought some knit underwear; I hadn't worn that kind of underwear for eighteen years. I experienced an inexpressible bliss at standing in line and paying. The size? I forgot my size. The biggest one. The saleswoman shook her head disapprovingly. Size fifty-five? She wrapped up underwear that I was never to wear, for my size was fifty-one. I learned that in Moscow. All the salesgirls were dressed in identical blue dresses. I bought a shaving-brush and a penknife. These wonderful things were ridiculously cheap. In the north everything was home-made – shaving-brushes and penknives. I went into a bookstore. In the used-book section they were selling Solovyov's *History of Russia* – 850 rubles for the entire set. No, I wouldn't buy books until I got to Moscow. But to hold books, to stand next to the counter of a bookstore was like a dish of hot meaty soup… like a glass of the water of life.

In Irkutsk our paths separated. In Yakutsk we walked around town in a group, bought plane tickets together, and stood in lines together – all four of us. It never entered our thoughts to entrust our money to anyone. That was not the custom in our world. I reached the bridge and looked down at the boiling, green Angara River. Its powerful waters were so clean, they were transparent right down to the bottom. Touching the cold brown rail with my frozen hand, I inhaled the gasoline fumes and dust of a city in winter, watched the hurrying pedestrians, and realized how much I was an urban dweller. I realized that the most precious time for man was when he was acquiring a homeland, but when love and family had not yet been born. This was childhood and early youth. Overwhelmed, I greeted Irkutsk with all my heart. Irkutsk was my Moscow.

As I approached the train station, someone tapped me on the shoulder. 'Someone wants to talk to you,' a tow-headed boy in a quilted jacket said and led me into the darkness. All at once a short man dove out into the light and began to examine my person.

I realized from his look just whom I had to deal with. His gaze, cowardly and impudent, flattering and hating, was familiar to me. Other snouts peered from the darkness. I had no need to know them; they would all

appear in their own time – with knives, with nails, with sharpened stakes in their hands… But for now my encounter was limited to one face with pale earthy skin, with swollen eyelids and tiny lips that seemed glued on to a shaven receding chin. ‘Who are you?’ He stretched out his dirty hand with its long fingernails. I had to answer, for neither the policeman nor the patrol could render any help here.

‘You’re – from Kolyma?’

‘Yes, from Kolyma.’

‘Where did you work there?’

‘I was a paramedic in a geological exploration group.’

‘A paramedic? A doc? You drank the blood of people like us. We have a few things to say to you.’

In my pocket I clasped the new penknife that I had just bought and said nothing. Luck was my only hope. Patience and luck are what saved and save us. These are the two whales supporting the convict’s world. And luck came to me.

The darkness separated. ‘I know him.’ A new figure appeared in the light, one that was totally unfamiliar to me. I have an excellent memory for faces, but I had never seen this man.

‘You?’ The finger with the long nail described an arc.

‘Yes, he worked in Kolyma,’ the unknown man said. ‘They say he was a decent sort. Helped people like us. They said good things about him.’

The finger with the nail disappeared.

‘OK, clear out,’ the thief said in an unhappy tone. ‘We’ll think about it.’

I was lucky that I didn’t have to spend the night at the station. The train was leaving for Moscow in the evening.

In the morning the light from the electric bulbs seemed heavy. The bulbs were murky and didn’t want to go out. Through the opening and closing doors could be seen the Irkutsk day – cold and bright. Swarms of people packed the corridors and filled up every square centimeter of space on the cement floor and the dirty benches as soon as anyone moved, stood up, left. There was an endless standing in line before the ticket windows. A ticket to Moscow, a ticket to Moscow, the rest can be worked out later… Not to Jambul, as the travel orders instructed. But who cared about travel orders in this heap of humanity, in this constant movement?

My turn at the window finally arrived, and I began to pull money from my pockets in jerky movements and to push the packet of gleaming bills

through the opening where they would disappear as inevitably as my life had disappeared until that moment. But the miracle continued, and the window threw out some solid object. It was rough, hard, and thin, like a wafer of happiness – a ticket to Moscow. The cashier shouted something to the effect that reserved berths were mixed with non-reserved ones, that a truly reserved car would be available only tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. I understood nothing except the words tomorrow and today. Today, today. Clasping my ticket firmly and attempting to feel all its corners with the deadened senses of my frostbitten hand, I pulled myself free and made my way to an open spot. I had just come from the far north by plane and I had no extra things – just a small plywood suitcase – the same one I had unsuccessfully tried to sell back in Adygalakh to get the money together to leave for Moscow. My traveling expenses had not been paid, but that was a meaningless detail. The main thing was this firm cardboard rectangle of a railroad ticket.

I caught my breath somewhere in a corner of the train station (my spot under the light was, of course, occupied) and set out across town, to the departure area.

Boarding had already begun. On a low hill stood a toy train, unbelievably small – just a few dirty cardboard boxes placed together among hundreds of other cardboard boxes where railroad employees lived and hung out their frozen wash to splash under the blows of the wind.

My train was in no way distinguishable from these railroad cars that had been transformed into dormitories.

The train didn’t look like a train that was about to set out in a few hours for Moscow. Rather, it looked like a dormitory. People were coming down the stairs of the cars, moving back and forth, and carrying things over their heads – just as others were doing around the dormitories. I realized that the train lacked the most important thing – a locomotive. Neither did any of the dormitories have a locomotive, and my train looked like a dormitory. I wouldn’t have believed that these cars could carry me away to Moscow, but boarding was already taking place.

There was a battle, a terrible battle at the entrance to the car. It seemed that work had ended two hours early today and everyone had come running home, to the barracks, to the warm stove, and they were all trying to get in the door.

Inside, you could forget about finding a conductor… Each person sought out his own place, dug himself in and maintained his own position. Of course, my reserved middle berth was occupied by some drunken lieutenant who belched endlessly. I dragged the lieutenant down and showed him my ticket. ‘I have a ticket for this spot too,’ he explained in a peaceable fashion, hiccuped, slipped down to the floor, and immediately fell asleep.

The car kept filling up with people. Suitcases and enormous bales were lifted up and disappeared somewhere above. There was an acrid smell of sheepskin coats, human sweat, dirt, and carbolic acid.

‘A prison car, a prison car,’ I repeated lying on my back, jammed into the narrow space between the middle and upper berths. The lieutenant, his collar opened and his face red and wrinkled, crawled upward past me. He got a grip on something, pulled himself upward, and disappeared.

In the confusion, amid the shouts of this prison car, I missed the main thing that I needed to hear, that which I had dreamed of for seventeen years, that which had become for me a sort of symbol of the ‘mainland’, a symbol of life. I hadn’t given it a thought during the battle for the berth. I hadn’t heard the train whistle. But the cars shuddered and began to move and our car, our prison car, set out somewhere just as if I were beginning to fall asleep and the barracks was moving before my very eyes.

I forced myself to realize that I was headed for Moscow.

At some switch point close to Irkutsk the car lurched and the figure of the lieutenant gripping his berth leaned out and hung down. He belched and vomited on my berth and that of my neighbor, who was wearing not a quilted coat or a pea jacket but a real overcoat with a fur collar. The man swore mightily and began to clean off the vomit.

My neighbor had with him an infinite number of plaited wicker baskets, some sewn up with burlap and some without burlap. From time to time women wearing country kerchiefs would appear from the depths of the car with similar wicker baskets on their shoulders. The women would shout something to my neighbor and he would wave back to them in a friendly fashion.

‘My sister-in-law! She’s going to visit relatives in Tashkent,’ he explained to me although I had asked for no explanations.

My neighbor was eager to open his nearest basket and show its contents. Aside from a wrinkled suit and a few small items it was empty. But it did contain a number of photographs, family and individual pictures in

enormous mounts. Some of them were daguerreotypes. The larger photographs were removed from the basket, and my neighbor eagerly explained in detail who was standing where, who was killed in the war, who received a medal, who was studying to be an engineer. ‘And here I am,’ he would inevitably say, pointing somewhere in the middle of the photograph, at which juncture everyone to whom he showed the photograph would meekly, politely, and sympathetically nod his head.

On the third day of our life in this rattling car my neighbor, having sized me up in detail, no doubt very correctly despite the fact that I had said nothing of myself, waited until the attention of our other neighbors was distracted and said quickly to me:

‘I have to make a transfer in Moscow. Can you help me carry one basket across the scales?’

‘I’m being met in Moscow.’

‘Oh, yes. I forgot you’re being met.’

‘What do you have in the baskets?’

‘What? Sunflower seeds. We’ll take galoshes back from Moscow. That sort of “private enterprise” is illegal, of course, but…’

I did not get out at any of the stations. I had food with me, and I was afraid the train would leave without me, would surely leave without me. I was convinced something bad would happen; happiness cannot continue endlessly.

Opposite me on the middle berth lay a man in a fur coat. He was infinitely drunk and had no cap or mittens. His drunken friends had put him on the train and entrusted his ticket to the conductor. The next day he got out at some station, returned with a bottle of some sort of dark wine, drank it all straight from the bottle, and threw the bottle on the floor. The bottle could be turned in for the deposit and the woman conductor agilely caught it and carried it off to her conductor’s lair, which was filled with blankets that no one in the mixed car rented and sheets that no one needed. Behind the same barrier of blankets in the conductor’s compartment a prostitute had set up shop on the upper berth. She was returning from Kolyma, and perhaps she wasn’t a prostitute but had simply been transformed into a prostitute by Kolyma… This lady sat not far from me on the lower berth, and the light from the swinging lamp fell on her utterly exhausted face with lips reddened by some substitute for lipstick. People would approach her and then they would disappear with her into the conductors’ compartment.

‘Fifty rubles,’ said the lieutenant who had sobered up and turned out to be a very pleasant young man.

He and I played a fascinating game. Whenever a new passenger entered the car, he and I would try to guess the new arrival’s age and profession. We would exchange observations and he would strike up a conversation with the passenger and come back to me with the answer.

Thus the lady who had painted lips but whose nails lacked any trace of polish was determined by us to be a member of the medical profession. The obviously fake leopard coat she wore testified that its wearer was probably a nurse or orderly, but not a doctor. A doctor wouldn’t have worn an artificial fur coat. Back then nylon and synthetic fabrics were unheard of. Our conclusion turned out to be correct.

From time to time a two-year-old child, dirty, ragged, and blue-eyed, would run past our compartment from somewhere in the depths of the railroad car. His pale cheeks were covered with scabs of some kind. In a minute or two the young father, who had heavy, strong working hands, would come after him with firm confident strides. He would catch the boy, and the child would laugh and smile at his father who would smile back at him and return him to his place in joyous bliss. I learned their story, a common story in Kolyma. The father had just served a criminal sentence and was returning to the mainland. The child’s mother chose not to return, and the father was taking his son with him, having firmly resolved to tear the child (and perhaps himself) free from the vise-like clutches of Kolyma. Why didn’t the mother leave? Perhaps it was the usual story: she’d found another man, liked the free life of Kolyma, and didn’t want to be in the situation of a second-rate citizen on the mainland… Or perhaps her youth had faded? Or maybe her love, her Kolyma love, had ended? Who knows? The mother had served a sentence under Article 58 of the Criminal Code, an article classifying political prisoners. Thus her crime had been of the most common and everyday sort. She knew what a return to the mainland would mean – a new sentence, new torments. There were no guarantees against a new sentence in Kolyma either, but at least she wouldn’t be hunted as all were hunted over there.

I neither learned nor wanted to learn anything. The nobility, the goodness, the love for his child was all I saw in this father who himself must previously have seen very little of his son. The boy had been in a nursery.

His clumsy hands unbuttoned the child's pants with their enormous unmatched buttons sewn on by rough, inept, but good hands. Both the boy and the father exuded happiness. The two-year-old child didn't know the word 'mama'. He shouted, 'Papa, papa!' He and this dark-skinned mechanic played with each other among the throng of card-sharks and wheeler-dealers with their bales and baskets. These two people were, of course, happy.

But there was no more sleep for the passenger who had slept for two days from the moment we had left Irkutsk and who had awakened only to drink another bottle of vodka or cognac or whatever it was. The train lurched. The sleeping passenger crashed to the floor and groaned – over and over again. The conductors sent for an ambulance and it was discovered that he had a broken shoulder. He was carried away on a stretcher, and disappeared from my life.

Suddenly there appeared in the car the figure of my savior. Perhaps 'savior' is too lofty a word since, after all, nothing important or bloody had occurred. My acquaintance sat, not recognizing me and as if not wanting to recognize me. Nevertheless we exchanged glances and I approached him. 'I just want to go home and see my family.' These were the last words I heard from this criminal.

And that is all: the glaring light of the bulb at the Irkutsk train station, the 'businessman' hauling around random pictures for camouflage, vomit avalanching down on to my berth from the throat of the young lieutenant, the sad prostitute on the upper berth in the conductor's compartment, the dirty two-year-old boy blissfully shouting, 'Papa! Papa!' This is all I remember as my first happiness, the unending happiness of 'freedom'. The roar of Moscow's Yaroslav Train Station met me like an urban surf; I had arrived at the city I loved above all other cities on earth. The train came to a halt and I could see the dear face of my wife who met me just as she had met me so many times before after each of my numerous trips. This trip, however, had been a long one – almost seventeen years. Most important, I was not returning from a business trip. I was returning from hell.

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# *Essays on the Criminal World*

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# *The Red Cross*

Life in camp is so arranged that only medical personnel can give the convict any real help. The protection of labor depends on the protection of health, and the protection of health means the protection of life. The camp director and the overseers who work under him, the head of the guard and the guards themselves, the head of the Divisional Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and all his staff of investigators, the chief of culture and education with all his inspectors – these are only some of the numerous varieties of camp authority. Regulation of life in the camps consists of carrying out the will – good or bad – of these people. In the eyes of the convict they are all symbols of oppression and compulsion. All these people force the convict to work, guard him day and night to keep him from escaping, check to see that he doesn't eat or drink too much. Daily, hourly, all these people repeat to the convict: 'Work! Work more!'

Only one person in the camp does not say these terrible, hated words to the convict. That is the doctor. The doctor uses other words: 'Rest,' 'You're tired,' 'Don't work tomorrow,' 'You're sick.' Only the doctor has the authority to save the convict from going out into the white winter fog to the icy stone face of the mine for many hours every day. The doctor is the convict's official defender from the arbitrary decisions of the camp authorities, from excessive zeal on the part of the more veteran guards.

At one time, large printed notices hung on the walls of the camp barracks: 'The Rights and Obligations of the Convict'. Obligations were many and rights few. There was the right to make a written request to the head of the camp – as long as it was not a collective request… there was the right to send letters to one's relatives through the camp censors… and the right to medical aid.

This last right was extremely important, although in many of the first-aid stations at the mines, dysentery was cured with a solution of potassium permanganate, while the same solution – just a little thicker – was smeared on abscessed wounds and frostbite cases.

A doctor could officially free a man from work by writing in a book: ‘Hospitalize’, ‘Send to health clinic’, or ‘Increase rations’. And in a ‘working’ camp the doctor’s most important job was to determine ‘labor categories’, the degree to which a prisoner was capable of working. The setting of the different labor categories also determined the work norm of each prisoner. A doctor could even free a man – by declaring him an invalid under the authority of the famous Article 458. Once a person was freed from work because of illness, no one could make him work. The doctor could not be controlled in these instances; only medical personnel higher up on the administrative ladder could do that. As far as treatment was concerned, the doctor was subordinate to no one.

It is important to remember that the doctor was also responsible for what went into the food – with regard both to quantity and quality.

The convict’s only defender in any real sense was the camp doctor. The latter’s power was considerable, since none of the camp authorities could control the actions of a specialist. An inaccurate, unconscientious diagnosis made by a doctor could only be determined by a medical worker of an equal or higher rank – that is, another doctor. Relations were almost inevitably hostile between camp authorities and their medical personnel. The very nature of their duties pulled them in different directions. The authorities always wanted group B (temporarily relieved from work because of illness) to be smaller so that the camp would have as many people as possible working. The doctor, on the other hand, saw that the bounds of good and evil had long since been passed, that people being sent to work were sick, tired and exhausted, and had a right to be freed from work in much greater numbers than the camp authorities desired.

If he had a strong enough will, the doctor could insist that people be relieved from work. Without a doctor’s sanction, no camp administrator could send people to work.

A doctor could save a convict from heavy labor. All convicts were divided, like horses, into categories of labor. There might be three, four or five such labor categories, although this term sounds as if it comes from a

dictionary of philosophy. That is one of life's witticisms or, rather, mockeries.

To give a man an 'easy' labor category often meant saving him from death. The saddest of all were those convicts who attempted to deceive the doctor and get into an easy labor category, and who were, in fact, more seriously ill than they themselves believed.

A doctor could release a man from work, send him to the hospital, and even classify him as an 'invalid', thus returning him to the mainland. True, the bed in the hospital and actually getting sent back didn't depend on the doctor, but it was at least a start.

All this and many other things relating to everyday routine were understood perfectly and exploited by the criminal ment in the camp. The thieves' code of morality prescribed a special attitude toward the doctor. Aside from legends about 'prison rations' and the supposed 'gentleman thief', the legend of the 'Red Cross' was prevalent in the criminal world. The Red Cross was a criminal term, and I tense up every time I hear it.

The camp criminals openly demonstrated their respect for medical personnel, promised them their support, and made a distinction between doctors and 'politicals'.

A legend grew up, which is still told in the camps today, of how a doctor was robbed by petty thieves, and how other, more important criminals found the stolen goods and returned them with an apology.

But this went further than mere stories. The criminals genuinely did not steal from doctors, or at least tried not to. Doctors, if they were civilians, were given presents of objects or money. If the doctors were convicts, the method would be persistent requests for treatment and threats to kill. Doctors who rendered assistance to criminals were praised.

To have a doctor 'on the hook' was the dream of every band of criminals. A criminal could be crude and insolent with any supervisor (he was even obliged to make a show of this sort of spirit under certain circumstances), but he would fawn, even cringe before a doctor. No criminal would allow a harsh word to be said about a doctor unless he realized that his complaint was not believed and that the doctor did not intend to satisfy his insolent demands.

No medical worker, the criminals believe, should be concerned about his fate in the camp. They assist him both in a material and a moral sense. Material assistance consists of stolen clothing. The criminal renders moral

support by bestowing his conversation on the doctor, visiting him, being pleasant.

It is easy for a doctor to send some robust murderer and extortionist to the hospital instead of a sick political prisoner exhausted by excessive work. It is easy to send him there and keep him there until the criminal himself is ready to check out.

It is easy to send criminals to other hospitals for treatment if they need to go there for their own criminal, ‘higher’ purposes.

It is easy to cover up for criminals who fake illness, and all the criminals are fakers and malingerers with their eternal trophic ulcers on shin and hip, with their trivial but impressive slashes on the stomach, and so on.

It is easy to hand over all the codeine and caffeine supplies together with the entire supply of drugs and alcoholic tinctures for use by one’s ‘benefactors’.

For many years I was responsible for admitting new patients to the camp hospital. One hundred percent of the fakers officially sent by doctors were thieves. They either bribed the local doctor or threatened him, and he would make out the false medical slips.

Sometimes the local doctor or the local camp head would try to get rid of an annoying or dangerous element in his ‘household’ by sending criminals to the hospital. They hoped at least to get a rest from them, if not to dispose of them altogether.

If a doctor was bribed, that was bad, very bad. But if he was frightened, that could be forgiven, for the criminals did not make empty threats. Once a doctor was sent from the hospital to the first-aid clinic of the Spokoiny Mine, where there was a large number of criminals. His name was Surovoy, and he had recently graduated from the Moscow Medical Institute. He was a young doctor, and – more important – he was a young convict doctor. Surovoy’s friend tried to persuade him not to go. He could have refused and been sent to a general work gang instead of taking on this patently dangerous work. Surovoy had come to the hospital from a general work gang; he was afraid to return to it and agreed to go to the mine and work at his profession. The camp authorities gave him instructions but no advice on how to conduct himself. He was categorically forbidden to send healthy thieves from the mine to the hospital. Within a month he was killed while admitting patients; on his body were fifty-two knife wounds.

In the women's zone of another mine an elderly woman doctor, Spizel, was cut down with an axe by her own orderly, a female criminal named 'Cooky' who was carrying out the 'sentence' passed by the other criminals. That was what the expression 'Red Cross' meant in those instances when the doctors could not be frightened or bribed.

Naïve doctors sought an explanation for these contradictions from the ideologists of the criminal world. One of the chief ideological leaders was a patient at the time in the surgical ward. Two months earlier he had used the usual foolproof method of getting himself out of solitary confinement: he sprinkled powder from a styptic pencil in his eyes – both of them, just to be sure. It just so happened that medical aid was late in arriving, and he was blinded. He was a bedridden invalid in the hospital and was to be shipped back to the mainland. But like Sir Williams from *Rocambole*, he continued – even though blind – to take part in making plans for future crimes, and in criminal 'courts of honor' was considered an incontestable authority. In response to a doctor's question about the Red Cross and the murder of medical personnel by thieves, Sir Williams answered with that peculiar accent characteristic of so many of the thieves: 'In life there are a number of situations in which the law should not be applied.' He was a real specialist on dialectics, this Sir Williams.

In his *Notes from the House of the Dead*, Dostoevsky never knew anyone from the true criminal world. He would never have allowed himself to express sympathy for that world.

The evil acts committed by criminals in camp are innumerable. The unfortunates are those from whom the thief steals their last rags, confiscates their last coin. The working man is afraid to complain, for he sees that the criminals are stronger than the camp authorities. The thief beats the working man and forces him to work. Tens of thousands of people have been beaten to death by thieves. Hundreds of thousands of people who have been in the camps are permanently seduced by the ideology of these criminals and have ceased to be people. Something criminal has entered into their souls for ever. Thieves and their morality have left an indelible mark on the soul of each.

The camp administrator is rude and cruel; the persons responsible for propaganda lie; the doctor has no conscience. But all this is trivial in comparison with the corrupting power of the criminal world. In spite of

everything, the authorities are still human beings, and the human element in them does survive. The criminals are not human.

The influence of their morality on camp life is boundless and many-sided. The camps are in every way schools of the negative. No one will ever receive anything useful or necessary from them – neither the convict himself, nor his superiors, nor the guard, nor the inadvertent witnesses (engineers, geologists, doctors), nor the camp administrators, nor their subordinates.

Every minute of camp life is a poisoned minute.

There is much there that a man should not know, should not see, and if he does see it, it is better for him to die.

There a convict learns to hate work. He does not and cannot learn anything else. He learns flattery, lying, petty acts and major villainies. He becomes totally engrossed in himself.

When he returns to ‘freedom’, he sees that he has not only failed to grow during his years in camp but his interests have narrowed, become impoverished and crude. Moral barriers have somehow been pushed aside.

It is possible to commit base acts – and live.

It is possible to lie – and live.

It is possible to give a promise and not fulfill that promise – and live.

It is possible to drink up a friend’s money.

It is possible to beg for charity – and live! Yes, even this is possible!

A person who has committed a base act doesn’t die.

In camp a human being learns sloth, deception, and viciousness. In ‘mourning his fate’, he blames the entire world.

He rates his own suffering too highly, forgetting that everyone has his own grief. He has forgotten empathy for another’s sorrow; he simply does not understand it and does not desire to understand it.

Skepticism is by no means the worst aspect of the camp heritage. There a human being learns to hate. He is afraid; he is a coward. He fears repetitions of his own fate. He fears betrayal, he fears his neighbors, he fears everything that a human being should not fear. He is morally crushed. His concepts of morality have changed without his having noticed this change.

A camp supervisor learns to wield limitless power over the prisoners, he learns to view himself as a god, as the only authorized representative of power, as a man of a ‘superior race’.

What will the guard tell his fiancée about his work in the Far North – the guard who often held human lives in his hands and who often killed people who stepped outside the ‘forbidden zone’? Will he tell her how he used his rifle butt to beat hungry old men who could not walk?

The young peasant who has become a prisoner sees that in this hell only the criminals live comparatively well, that they are important, that the all-powerful camp administrators fear them. The criminals always have clothes and food, and they support each other.

The young peasant cannot but be struck by this. It begins to seem to him that the criminals possess the truth of camp life, that only by imitating them will he tread the path that will save his life. He sees, moreover, that there are people who can live even on the very bottom of existence. And the peasant begins to imitate the conduct of the criminals. He agrees with their every word, is ready to carry out all their errands, speaks of them with fear and reverence. He is anxious to adorn his speech with their slang; no member of either sex, convict or civilian, who has been to Kolyma has failed to carry away from Kolyma the peculiar slang of the criminals.

These words are a poison that seeps into the soul. It is this mastery of the criminal dialect itself that marks the beginning of the non-criminal’s intimacy with the criminal world.

The intellectual convict is crushed by the camp. Everything he valued is ground into the dust while civilization and culture drop from him within weeks. The method of persuasion in a quarrel is the fist or a stick. The way to induce someone to do something is by means of a rifle butt, a punch in the teeth.

The intellectual becomes a coward, and his own brain provides a ‘justification’ of his own actions. He can persuade himself of anything, attach himself to either side in a quarrel. The intellectual sees in the criminal world ‘teachers of life’, fighters for the ‘people’s rights’. A blow can transform an intellectual into the obedient servant of a petty crook. Physical force becomes moral force.

The intellectual is permanently terrified. His spirit is broken, and he takes this frightened and broken spirit with him back into civilian life.

Engineers, geologists, and doctors who have come to Kolyma to do contract work for Far Northern Construction are quickly corrupted. The sources of this corruption are many: a desire for money, rationalizations that the ‘taiga is the law’, cheap and convenient slave labor, a narrowing of

cultural interests. No one who has worked in the camps ever returns to the mainland. He would be worthless there, for he has grown accustomed to a ‘rich’, carefree life. It is this very depravity that is described in works of literature as ‘the call of the North’.

The criminal world, the habitual criminals whose tastes and habits are reflected in the total life-pattern of Kolyma, are mainly responsible for this corruption of the human soul.

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# *Women in the Criminal World*

Aglaya Demidova was brought to the hospital with false documents. Neither her case history nor her convict passport was forged. No, these were in order. But the folder containing her papers was new and yellow – testimony of a recent sentencing. She arrived under the same name that she had used when she had been brought to the hospital two years earlier. Nothing in her situation had changed except her sentence. Two years ago her folder had been dark blue, and the sentence had been ten years.

A three-digit number had been added to the short list of two-digit figures listed in the column headed ‘Article of Criminal Code’. It was her medical documents that were forged – the history of the illness, the laboratory tests, the diagnosis. They were forged by people who occupied official posts and who had at their disposal rubber stamps and their own good (or bad – who cares?) names. The head of medical services at the mine spent many truly inspired hours inventing a false case history.

The diagnosis of tuberculosis followed logically from the cleverly invented daily records. It was all there – the thick sheaf of temperature charts filled out to mimic typical tubercular curves and the forms testifying to impossible lab tests with threatening prognoses. It was the work of a doctor who, as if taking a medical examination, had been asked to describe the progress of a tubercular condition which had reached the point where immediate hospitalization was essential.

The work might have been done out of a sporting urge – just to show the central hospital that people back at the mines also knew their jobs. It was pleasant to remember, in the correct order, everything you had once learned at medical school. Of course, you never thought you would have occasion to apply your knowledge in such an unusual, ‘artistic’ fashion. The main thing was that Demidova be accepted at the hospital – no matter what. The

hospital could not refuse, had no right to refuse, this kind of patient, even if the doctors had a thousand doubts.

Suspicions cropped up right away, and Demidova sat alone in the hospital's enormous reception room while the question of her admission was discussed in local 'higher circles'. True, she was alone only in the Chestertonian sense of the word. The attendant and the orderlies didn't count, nor did the two guards who were never more than a step away from her. A third guard was off picking his way through the thickets of the hospital bureaucracy.

Demidova did not even bother to take off her cap and unbuttoned only the collar of her sheepskin coat. She smoked hurriedly, one cigarette after another, tossing the butts into a wooden ashtray filled with wood shavings. As she paced about the reception-room from the narrow barred windows to the doors, her guards followed her, imitating her movements.

When the doctor on duty returned with a third doctor, the northern darkness had already fallen, and the lights had to be turned on.

'They won't take me?' Demidova asked the guard.

'No, they won't,' the guard answered gloomily.

'I knew they wouldn't. It's all Kroshka's fault. She knifed that woman doctor, and they're taking it out on me.'

'No one's taking anything out on you,' the doctor said.

'I know better.'

Demidova left ahead of the guards, the outside door slammed, and the truck engine roared.

Immediately a door opened from the corridor, and the head of the hospital entered with a whole retinue of security officers.

'Where is she? Where is Demidova?'

'They've already taken her away, sir.'

'That's a shame, a real shame. I wanted to get a look at her. It's all your fault, Peter Ivanovich – you and your jokes.' And the director and his companions left the reception room.

The director wanted at least to get a glance at the famous Demidova, a thief with a truly unusual story.

Aglaya Demidova had been sentenced to ten years for killing a woman whose responsibility it was to make job assignments. Demidova strangled her victim with a towel for being too pushy. Six months ago Demidova was being taken from court to the mine. There was a single guard, since it was

only a few hours by car from the local court where they tried her to the mine where she worked. Space and time are analogous in the Far North. Space is generally measured in units of time; such is the practice of the Yakut tribesmen, who calculate the distance from one mountain to another as, for example, six days. Those who lived near the main artery – the highway – measured distances by the length of time it took to get there by motor vehicle.

Demidova's guard was a young 'old man' who had stayed on for a second hitch and who was used to the liberties and peculiarities of life as a guard, the total master of the prisoners' fates. It was not the first time that he had 'accompanied' a woman, and this sort of trip promised a form of amusement that most soldiers in the North enjoyed only rarely.

The three of them – the guard, the driver, and Demidova – ate at a roadside cafeteria. The guard drank some grain alcohol to get up his courage (in the North only higher-ups drink vodka) and took Demidova into the bushes. Rose willow, aspen saplings, and willow thickets grow luxuriously around any taiga settlement.

When they entered the bushes, the guard laid his automatic rifle on the ground and approached Demidova. Demidova tore herself free, grabbed the rifle, and in two criss-crossing bursts riddled the body of the amorous guard with nine bullets. She then threw the rifle into the bushes, returned to the cafeteria, and hitched a ride on a passing truck. The driver sounded the alarm, and the body of the guard along with the rifle was soon found. Demidova herself was arrested a couple of days later only a few hundred miles from where her tryst with the guard had taken place. She was again brought to trial and this time sentenced to twenty-five years. Even before she had shown no willingness to work and had occupied herself with robbing her neighbors in the barracks, so the head of the mine decided to get rid of her at any price. The hope was that she would not be returned to the mine after the hospital but would be sent somewhere else.

Demidova specialized in robbing stores and apartments – a 'city girl' in the terminology of the criminal world. This world acknowledges only two types of women: thieves, whose profession, like the men's, is stealing, and prostitutes, the men's sweethearts.

The first group is considerably smaller than the second but enjoys a certain respect among criminals, who consider women to be creatures of a lower order. Their professional abilities and services, however, demand

recognition. The female companion of a thief will, not infrequently, participate in working out the plans for a robbery and even in the robbery itself, but she does not take part in the male ‘trials of honor’, where criminals actually try and sentence each other for violating their own peculiar code of ethics. These special male and female roles have been dictated in part by a life where men are imprisoned apart from women – a circumstance that has influenced the lifestyles, habits, and rules of both sexes. Women are not as hard as men, and their ‘trials’ are neither as bloody nor as cruel. In a thieves’ den, the women commit murder less frequently than their male comrades.

Prostitutes constitute the second and larger group of women connected with the world of crime. They are the thieves’ companions, and they are the breadwinners. Naturally, they participate, when necessary, in break-ins, casing a building and staking it out, concealing the stolen merchandise, and eventually fencing it, but they by no means enjoy equal rights with the men of the criminal world. Any celebration is unthinkable without their presence, but they can never even dream of participating in ‘courts of honor’.

A third- or fourth-generation criminal learns contempt for women from childhood. ‘Theoretical’ and ‘pedagogical’ sessions alternate with the personal example of his elders. Woman, an inferior being, has been created only to satisfy the criminal’s animal craving, to be the butt of his crude jokes and the victim of public beatings when her thug decides to ‘whoop it up’. She is a living object, used by the criminal on a temporary basis.

When a criminal needs to ‘get to’ a camp official, it is considered quite normal and proper for him to send his prostitute-companion to the man’s bed. She herself shares this view. Conversations on this topic are always extremely cynical, laconic in the extreme, and descriptive. Time is precious.

The criminal code of ethics renders jealousy and courtship meaningless. Time-honored tradition permits the leader of a gang to select the best prostitute as his temporary wife. And if only yesterday this prostitute had been considered the property of a different thug, property that he could loan to his comrades in crime, today all his rights transfer to the new owner. If he is arrested tomorrow, the prostitute will return to her former companion. And if the latter, in turn, is arrested, she will be told who her new owner is to be – the master of her life and her death, her fate, her money, her actions, her body.

What place can there be for such a feeling as jealousy? It simply does not exist in the thug's ethical system.

A criminal, they say, is human, and no human feeling is alien to him. It may be that he regrets having to give up his woman, but the law is the law, and those responsible for observing 'ideological' purity, the purity of criminal ethics (without any quotation marks), will immediately point out the jealous criminal's error to him. And he will yield to the law.

There are instances when hot tempers and the hysteria characteristic of all criminals will make him defend 'his woman'. On such occasions the question is taken up in a criminal court, and criminal prosecutors will cite age-old traditions, demanding that the guilty man be punished.

Usually the parties concerned do not come to blows, and the prostitute submits to sleeping with her new master. There are no *ménages à trois* in the criminal world, with two men sharing one woman. Nor is it possible for a female thief to live with a non-criminal.

Men and women are separated in the camps. However, there are hospitals, transit prisons, outpatient clinics, and clubs where men and women can hear and see each other.

One cannot but be amazed at the inventiveness of the prisoners, their energy in reaching goals that they have set for themselves. The amount of energy expended in prison to obtain a piece of crumpled tin which can be transformed into a knife to commit murder or suicide is incredible.

The energy expended by a criminal intent on arranging a meeting with a prostitute is enormous. The most critical factor is finding a place to which to summon the prostitute; the criminal need have no doubt as to whether or not she will come. The hand of justice will always find the guilty woman. She will dress in men's clothing and have sexual relations an extra time with her supervisor – just to slip away at the appointed hour to her unknown lover. The love drama is played out quickly – the way grass drops its seed in the Far North. If seen by the overseer when she returns to the women's zone, she will be put in a punishment cell, sentenced to a month of solitary confinement, or sent to a penal mine. She will endure all this with complete submission and even be proud of her actions; she has fulfilled her duty as a prostitute.

There was an instance in a large northern hospital for convicts when a prostitute was sent to spend an entire night with an important thug who was a patient in the surgical ward. The attendant on duty was threatened with a

knife, and a stolen suit was given to the civilian orderly. Finally, the woman had relations with all eight of the criminals who were sharing the room. The suit's real owner recognized it and presented a written complaint. Considerable effort was expended to conceal the affair.

The woman was not at all upset or embarrassed when she was found in a room in the men's hospital.

'The fellows asked me to help them out, so I came,' she explained calmly.

It is not difficult to understand that almost all the criminals and their female companions become ill with syphilis, and chronic gonorrhea is endemic – even in this age of penicillin.

There is a well-known classic expression: 'Syphilis is not a disease but a misfortune.' Here syphilis is not viewed as a cause for shame but is considered to be the prisoner's luck rather than his misfortune. This is yet a further example of the notorious shift of values.

First, all cases of venereal disease must be treated, and every thug is aware of that. He knows he can 'brake' in the hospital and that he won't be sent to some God-forsaken place but will live and be treated in relatively comfortable settlements where there are venereologists and specialists. This is so well known that even those criminals whom God has spared the third and fourth cross of the Wassermann reaction claim that they have venereal disease. They are also well aware that a negative laboratory result is not always reliable. Self-induced ulcers and false complaints are encountered along with real ulcers and genuine symptoms.

Venereal patients are kept in special treatment areas. At one time no work was done in these areas, but this system converted them into virtual resorts, a sort of *mon repos*. Later these 'zones' were set up in special mines and wood-felling areas, and the prisoners had to produce the normal work quotas, but received medication (Salvarsan) and a special diet.

In point of fact, however, relatively little work was demanded of the prisoners in these zones, and life there was considerably easier than in the mines.

Male venereal zones were always the source from which the hospital admitted the criminals' young 'wives' who had been infected with syphilis through the anus. Almost all the professional criminals were homosexuals. When no women were at hand, they seduced and infected other men – most

often by threatening them with a knife, less frequently in exchange for ‘rags’ (clothing) or bread.

No discussion of women in the criminal world is complete without a mention of the vast army of ‘Zoikas’, ‘Mankas’, ‘Dashkas’, and other creatures of the male sex who were christened with women’s names. Strangely enough the bearers of these feminine names responded to them as if they saw nothing unusual, shameful, or offensive in them.

It is not considered shameful to be kept by a prostitute, since it is assumed that the prostitute will value highly any contact with a professional criminal. Furthermore, young criminals who are just trying their wings are very much attracted by the prospect of becoming pimps:

> They’ll be sentencing us soon,
> March us off into the mines;
> Working girls will sing a tune
> And get a package through the lines.

This is a prison song; the ‘working girls’ are prostitutes.

There are occasions when vanity and self-pity, emotions that take the place of love, cause a woman in the world of crime to commit ‘unlawful acts’.

Of course, more is expected of a thief than of a prostitute. A female thief living with an overseer is, in the opinion of the zealots of thug jurisprudence, committing treason. The ‘bitch’s’ error might be pointed out to her by means of a beating, or they might simply cut her throat. Similar conduct on the part of a prostitute would be regarded as normal.

When a woman has such a run-in with the law, the question is not always resolved even-handedly, and much depends on the personal qualities of the person involved.

Tamara Tsulukidze, a twenty-year-old thief and former companion of an import mobster in Tiflis, took up with Grachov, the head of cultural activities. Grachov was thirty, a lieutenant, and a handsome bachelor with a gallant bearing.

Grachov had a second mistress in camp, a Polish woman by the name of Leszczewska, who was one of the famous ‘actresses’ of the camp theater. When the lieutenant took up with Tamara, she did not demand that he give up Leszczewska. The rakish Grachov thus lived simultaneously with two

‘wives’, showing a preference for the Muslim way of life. Being a man of experience, he tried to divide his attention equally between the two women and was successful in his efforts. Not only love but also its material manifestations were shared; each edible present was prepared in duplicate. It was the same with lipstick, ribbons, and perfume; both Leszczewska and Tsulukidze always received the same ribbons, the same bottles of perfume, the same scarves on the same day.

The impression this made was very touching. Moreover, Grachov was a handsome, clean-cut young man, and both Leszczewska and Tsulukidze (who lived in the same barracks) were ecstatic at their lover’s tactful behavior. Nevertheless, they did not become friends, and Leszczewska was secretly delighted when Tamara was called to task by the hospital mobsters.

One day Tamara fell ill and was hospitalized. That night the doors of the women’s ward opened, and an ambassador of the criminal world appeared on the threshold. He reminded Tamara of the property laws regarding women in the criminal world and instructed her to go to the surgical ward and carry out ‘the will of the sender’. The messenger claimed there were people here who knew the Tiflis mobster whose companion Tamara had been. Here in camp he was being replaced by Senka, ‘the Nose’. Tamara was to submit to his embraces.

Tamara grabbed a kitchen knife and rushed at the crippled thug. The attendants barely managed to save him. The man departed, threatening and cursing Tamara. Tamara checked out of the hospital the next morning.

There were several attempts – all of them unsuccessful – to return the prodigal daughter to the proud standards of the criminal world. Tamara was stabbed with a knife, but the wound was not serious. Her sentence ended, and she married an overseer – a man with a revolver – and the criminal world saw no more of her.

The blue-eyed Nastya Arxarova, a typist from the Kurgansk Oblast, was neither a prostitute nor a thief, but she voluntarily linked her fate to the criminal world.

Even as a child, Nastya had been surrounded by a suspicious respect, a sinister deference for the criminal world, whose figures seemed to have come from the pages of the detective novels she read. This respect, which Nastya had observed while still in the ‘free world’, was present in prison and in the camps as well – wherever there were criminals.

There was nothing mysterious about this; Nastya's older brother was a well-known burglar in the Urals, and, since childhood, Nastya had bathed in the rays of his criminal glory. Without even noticing it, she found herself surrounded by criminals, became involved in their interests and affairs, and did not refuse to hide stolen goods for them. Her first three-month sentence angered and hardened her, and she became part of the criminal world. As long as she remained in her home town, the criminals were reluctant to declare their property rights to her for fear of her brother. Nastya's 'social' position was more or less that of a thief; she had never been a prostitute and was sent as a thief on the usual long trips at the expense of the mob. She had no brother on these trips to protect her. On her first release from prison, the leader of a local mob in the first town she came to made her his wife and in the process infected her with gonorrhea. He was soon arrested and crooned a criminal parting song to her: 'My buddy will take you over.' Nastya didn't stay long with the 'buddy', since he too was soon arrested, and Nastya's next owner exercised his rights to her. Nastya found him physically repulsive, because he slobbered constantly and was ill with some form of herpes. She attempted to use her brother's name to defend herself, but it was pointed out to her that her brother had no right to violate the immortal rules of the criminal world. She was threatened with a knife, and her resistance ceased.

At the hospital, when 'romance' was called for, Nastya showed up meekly and often spent time in the punishment cells. She cried a lot – either because it was in her nature or because her own fate, the tragic fate of a twenty-year-old girl, terrified her.

Vostokov, an elderly doctor at the hospital, was touched by Nastya's lot, even though she was only one of thousands in such a situation. He promised to help her get a job as a typist at the hospital if she would promise to change her way of life. 'That is not in my power,' Nastya answered him in her beautiful handwriting. 'I cannot be saved. But if you wish to help me, buy me a pair of nylon stockings, the smallest size. Ready to do anything for you, Nastya Arxarova.'

The thief Sima Sosnovskaya was tattooed from her head to her feet. Her entire body was covered with amazing interwined sexual scenes of the most unusual sort. Only her face, neck, and arms below the elbow were free of tattoos. Sima had acquired fame in the hospital through a bold theft – she had stolen a gold watch from the wrist of a guard who had decided to

exploit the attractive girl's favorable disposition. Sima was of a much more peaceable nature than was Aglaya Demidova, or else the guard would have lain in the bushes until the Second Coming. She viewed the incident as an amusing adventure and considered that a gold watch was not too high a price for her favors. The guard nearly went crazy and, right up to the last minute, demanded that Sima return the watch. He searched her twice – quite unsuccessfully. The hospital was near, and the group of convicts being taken there was small; the guard couldn't risk a scandal in the hospital. Sima remained in possession of the gold watch. It was not long before she had sold it for liquor, and all trace of the watch vanished.

The moral code of the professional criminal, like that of the Koran, prescribes contempt for women. Woman is a contemptible, base creature deserving beatings but not pity. This is true of all women without exception. Any female representative of any other, non-criminal world is held in contempt by the mobster. Group rape ('in chorus') is not at all rare in the mines of the Far North. Supervisors bring their wives to Kolyma under armed guard; no woman ever walks or travels anywhere alone. Small children are guarded in the same fashion, since the seduction of little girls is the perpetual dream of every thug. This dream does not always remain a mere dream.

Children in the criminal world are educated in a spirit of contempt for women. The criminals beat their prostitute companions so much that it is said that these women are no longer able to experience the fullness of love. Sadistic inclinations are honed by the ethics of the criminal world.

The criminal is not supposed to experience any comradely or friendly emotion for his 'woman'. Nor is he supposed to have any pity for the object of his underground amusements. No justice can be shown toward the women of this world, for women's rights have been cast out of the gates of the criminal's ethical zone.

There is, however, a single exception to this black rule. There is one woman whose honor is not only protected from any attacks but who is even put on a high pedestal. There is one woman who is romanticized by the criminal world, one woman who has become the subject of criminal lyrics and the folklore heroine of many generations of criminals.

This woman is the criminal's mother.

The thug sees himself surrounded by a vicious and hostile world. Within this world, populated by his enemies, there is only one bright figure worthy

of pure love, respect, and worship: his mother.

According to his own ethics, the criminal's attitude to the female sex is a combination of vicious contempt for women in general and a religious cult of motherhood. Many empty words have been written about sentimentality in the prisons. In reality this is the sentimentality of the murderer who waters his rose garden with the blood of his victims, the sentimentality of a person who bandages the wound of some small bird and who, an hour later, is capable of tearing this bird to shreds, since the sight of death is the best entertainment he knows.

We should recognize the true face of those who originated this cult of motherhood, a face that has been concealed by a poetic haze.

The criminal deifies his mother's image, makes it the object of the most sensitive prison lyrics, and demands that all others pay her the highest respect *in absentia*. He does this with the same heedlessness and theatricality with which he 'signs his name' on the corpse of a murdered renegade, rapes a woman before the eyes of anyone who may care to watch, violates a three-year-old girl, or infects some male 'Zoika' with syphilis.

At first glance, the only human emotion that seems to have been preserved in the criminal's obscene and distorted mind is his feeling for his mother. The criminal always claims to be a respectful son, and any crude talk about anyone's mother is always nipped in the bud. Motherhood represents a high ideal and at the same time something very real to everyone. A man's mother will always forgive, will always comfort and pity him.

One of the classic songs of the criminal world is entitled 'Fate':

> Momma worked when it got bad,
> And I began to steal.
> 'You'll be a thief,
> Just like your dad,'
> She cried, over our meal.

Knowing that his mother will remain with him till the end of his brief and stormy life, the criminal spares her his cynicism. But even this one supposed ray of light is false – like every other feeling in the criminal soul. The glorification of one's mother is camouflage, a means of deceit – at best, a more or less bright expression of sentimentality in prison.

Even this seemingly lofty feeling is a lie from beginning to end – as is everything else. No criminal has ever sent so much as a kopeck to his mother or made any attempt to help her on his own, even though he may have drunk up thousands of stolen rubles. This feeling for his mother is nothing but a pack of lies and theatrical pretense. The mother cult is a peculiar smokescreen used to conceal the hideous criminal world. The attitude toward women is the litmus test of any ethical system. Let us note here that it was the coexistence of the cult of motherhood with contempt for women that made the Russian poet Esenin so popular in the criminal world. But that is another story.

Any female thief or thief's companion, any woman who has directly or indirectly entered the world of crime, is forbidden all 'romance' with non-criminals. In such cases the traitress is not killed. A knife is too noble a weapon to use on a woman; a stick or a poker is sufficient for her.

It is quite another matter if a man becomes involved with a woman from the free world. This is honor and glory, the subject of one man's boasting stories and another's envy. Such instances are not at all rare, but so exaggerated are the fairy tales surround them that it is extremely difficult to learn the truth. A typist becomes a prosecutor, a courier is transformed into the director of a factory, and a salesgirl is promoted to the rank of a minister in the government. Bald-faced lies crowd the truth to the back of the stage, into utter blackness, and it is impossible to make head or tail of the play's action.

It is undoubtedly true, however, that a certain percentage of the criminals have families back home, families that have long since been abandoned by their criminal fathers. The wives must raise their children and struggle with life as best they can. Sometimes it does happen that husbands return from imprisonment to their families, but they do not usually stay long. The 'wandering spirit' lures them to new travels, and the local police provide an additional incentive for a speedy departure. The children remain behind – children who are not horrified by their father's profession. On the contrary, they pity him and even long to follow in his footsteps, as the song 'Fate' tells us:

> So have the strength to fight your fate,
> Don't look around for friend or mate.
> I'm very weak, but I will have

To follow my dead father’s path.

The cadre officers of the criminal world – its ‘leaders’ and ‘ideologues’ – are criminals whose families have practiced the trade for generations.

As for fatherhood and the raising of children, these questions are totally excluded from the Talmud of vice. The criminal automatically expects his daughters (if they exist somewhere) to adopt a career of prostitution and become the companions of successful thieves. In such instances the conscience of the criminal is not burdened in the slightest – even within the unique ethical code of the world of crime. As for his sons becoming thugs, this, to the criminal, is a perfectly natural turn of events.

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# *Resurrection of the Larch*

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# *Quiet*

All of us, the whole work gang, took our places in the camp dining hall with a mixture of surprise, suspicion, caution, and fear. The tables were the same dirty, sticky ones we had eaten at since we had arrived. The tables should not have been sticky because the last thing anyone wanted was to spill his soup. But there were no spoons, and any spilled soup was scraped together by fingers and simply licked up.

It was dinnertime for the night shift. Our work gang was hidden away among the night shift so that no one might see us – as if there were anyone to see us! We were the weakest, the worst, the hungriest. We were the human trash, but they had to feed us, and not with garbage or leftovers. We too had to receive a certain amount of fats, solid foods, and mainly bread – bread that was just the same as that given to the best work gangs that still preserved their strength and were fulfilling the plan of ‘basic production’: gold, gold, gold…

When we were fed, it was always last. Night or day, it didn’t make any difference. Tonight we were last again.

We lived in a section of the barracks. I knew some of the semi-corpses, either from prison or from transit camps. I moved together with these lumps in pea coats, cloth hats that covered the ears and were not taken off except for visits to the bathhouse, quilted jackets made from torn pants that had been singed at camp-fires. Only by memory did I recognize the red-faced Tartar, Mutalov, who had been the only resident in all Chikment whose two-storied house had an iron roof, and Efremov, the former First Secretary of the Chikment City Council, who had liquidated Mutalov as a class in 1930.

There too was Oxman, former head of a divisional propaganda office until Marshal Timoshenko, who was not yet a marshal, kicked him out of the division as a Jew. Also there was Lupinov, assistant to the supreme

prosecutor of the USSR, Vyshinsky. Zhavoronkov was a train engineer for the Savelisk depot. Also there was the former head of the secret police in the city of Gorky who had had a quarrel with one of his former ‘wards’ when they met at a transit camp:

‘So they beat you? So what? You signed, so you’re an enemy. You interfere with the Soviet government, keep us from working. It’s because of insects like you that I got fifteen years.’

I couldn’t help butting in: ‘Listening to you, I don’t know whether to laugh or spit in your face…’

There were various people in this doomed brigade. There was a member of the religious sect, *God Knows*. Maybe the sect had a different name, but that was the one invariable answer the man ever gave in response to questions from the guards.

I remember, of course, the sectarian’s name – Dmitriev – although he never answered to it. Dmitriev was moved, placed in line, led by his companions or the work gang leader.

The convoy changed frequently, and almost every new commander tried to find out why he refused to respond to the loud command – ‘Names!’ – shouted out before the men set out for work.

The work gang leader would briefly explain the circumstances, and the relieved guard would continue the roll call.

The sectarian got on everyone’s nerves in the barracks. At night we couldn’t sleep because of the cold and warmed ourselves at the iron stove, wrapping our arms around it and gathering the departing warmth of cooling iron, pressing our faces to the metal.

Naturally we blocked this feeble warmth from the other residents of the barracks who, hungry too, couldn’t sleep in their distant corners covered with frost. From those corners someone with the right to shout or even beat us would jump out and drive the hungry workers from the stove with oaths and kicks.

You could stand at the stove and legally dry your bread, but who had bread to dry? And how many hours could you take to dry a piece of bread?

We hated the administration and the camp guards, hated each other, and most of all we hated the sectarian – for his songs, hymns, psalms…

Silently we clutched the stove. The sectarian sang in a hoarse voice as if he had a cold. He sang softly, but his hymns and psalms were endless.

The sectarian and I worked as a pair. The other members of the section rested from the singing while working, but I didn't have even that relief.

'Shut up!' someone shouted at the sectarian.

'I would have died long ago if it weren't for singing these songs. I want to go away – into the frost. But I'm too weak. If I were just a little stronger. I don't ask God for death. He sees everything himself.'

There were other people in the brigade, wrapped in rags, just as dirty and hungry, with the same gleam in their eyes. Who were they? Generals? Heroes of the Spanish War? Russian writers? Collective-farm workers from Volokolamsk?

We sat in the dining hall wondering why we weren't being fed, whom they were waiting for. What news was to be announced? For us any news could only be good. There is a certain point beyond which anything is an improvement. The news could only be good. Everyone understood that – not with their minds, but with their bodies.

The door of the serving-window opened from inside and we were brought soup in bowls – hot! Kasha – warm! And cranberry pudding for dessert – almost cold! Everyone was given a spoon, and the head of the brigade warned us that we would have to return the spoons. Of course we would return the spoons. Why did we need spoons? To exchange for tobacco in other barracks? Of course we'll return the spoons. Why do we need spoons? We're used to eating straight from the bowl. Who needs a spoon? Anything that's left in the bottom of the bowl can be pushed with fingers to the edge…

There was no need to think; in front of us was food. They gave us bread – two hundred grams. 'You get only one ration of bread,' the brigade leader declared with a note of excited solemnity, 'but you can eat your fill of the rest.'

And we ate 'our fill'. Any soup consists of two parts: the thick part and the liquid. We got 'our fill' of the liquid. But of the kasha we got as much as we wanted. Dessert was lukewarm water with a light taste of starch and a trace of dissolved sugar. This was the cranberry pudding.

A convict's stomach is not rendered insensitive by hunger and the coarse food. On the contrary, its sensitivity to taste is heightened. The qualitative reaction of a convict's stomach is in no way inferior to that of the finest laboratory. No 'free' stomach could have discovered the presence of sugar in the pudding that we ate or, rather, drank that night in Kolyma at the

‘Partisan Mine’, but the pudding seemed sweet, exquisitely sweet. It seemed a miracle and everyone remembered that sugar still existed in the world and that it even ended up in the convict’s pot. What magician…?

The magician was not far away. We looked him over after the second dish of the second dinner.

‘Just one ration of bread,’ said the brigade leader. ‘Eat your fill of the rest.’ He looked at the magician.

‘Yes, of course,’ said the magician.

He was a small clean auburn-haired man whose face had not yet suffered from frostbite.

Our superiors, supervisors, overseers, camp administrators, guards had all been to Kolyma, and Siberia had signed its name on each of their faces, left its mark, cut extra wrinkles, and put the mark of frostbite as an indelible brand!

On the rosy face of the clean dark-haired little man there was still no spot, no brand. This was the new ‘senior educator’ of our camp, and he had just arrived from the continent. The ‘senior educator’ was conducting an experiment.

The educator insisted to the head of the camp that an ancient Kolyma custom be abolished: traditionally the remains of the soup and kasha had been carried daily from the kitchen to the criminal barracks when only the thick part was left on the bottom. This had always been given out to the best work gangs to support not the hungriest, but the least hungry work gangs, to encourage them to fulfill the ‘plan’ and turn everything into gold – even the souls and bodies of the administration, the guards, the convicts.

Those work gangs as well as the criminal element had become accustomed to these leftovers, but the new ‘educator’ was not in agreement with the custom and insisted that the leftovers be given to the weakest, the hungriest to ‘waken their conscience’.

‘They’re so hardened, they have no conscience,’ the foreman attempted to intervene, but the educator was firm and received permission to try the experiment.

Our brigade, the hungriest, was chosen for the experiment.

‘Now you’ll see. A man will eat and in gratitude work better for the state. How can you expect any work out of these “goners”? “Goners” is the right word, isn’t it? That’s the first word of local convict slang I learned here in Kolyma. Am I saying it right?’

‘Yeah,’ said the area chief, an old resident of Kolyma and not a convict. He’d ‘ploughed under’ thousands at this mine and had come especially to enjoy the experiment.

‘You could feed these loafers and fakers meat and chocolate for a month with no work, and even then they wouldn’t work. Something must have changed in their skulls. They’re culls, rejects. Production demands that we feed the ones that work and not these bums!’

Standing there beside the serving-window, they began to quarrel and shout. The educator was vehemently making some point. The area chief was listening with a displeased expression, and when the name Makarenko was mentioned, he threw up his hands and walked away.

We each prayed to our own god, the sectarian to his own. We prayed that the window would not be closed and that the educator would win out. The collective convict will of twenty men strained itself… and the educator had his way.

Not wanting to part with a miracle, we kept on eating.

The area chief took out his watch, but the horn was already sounding – a shrill camp siren calling us to work.

‘OK, you busy bees,’ said the new educator, uncertainly enunciating his unnecessary phrase. ‘I’ve done everything I could. I did it for you. Now it’s up to you to answer by working, and only by working.’

‘We’ll work, citizen chief,’ pronounced the former head of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR with dignity, tying his pea coat shut with a dirty towel and blowing warm air into his mittens.

The door opened and in a cloud of white steam we all came out into the frost to remember this success for the rest of our lives – that is, those who had lives left to live. The frost didn’t seem so bad to us – but only at first. It was too cold to be ignored.

We came to the mine, sat down in a circle to wait for the work gang leader at the very spot where we used to have a fire, breathe into the gold flame, where we singed our mittens, caps, pants, pea coats, jackets, vainly attempting to get warm and escape the cold. But the fire was a long time ago – the previous year, perhaps. This winter the workers were not permitted to warm themselves; only the guard had permission. He sat down, rearranged the burning logs, and the fire blazed higher. Then he buttoned his sheepskin coat, sat on a log, and stood his rifle beside him.

A white fog surrounded the mine, which was lit only by the fire of the guard. The sectarian, who was sitting next to me, stood up and walked past the guard into the fog, into the sky…

‘Halt! Halt!’

The guard wasn’t a bad sort, but he knew his rifle well.

‘Halt!’

A shot rang out, then the dry sound of a gun being cocked. The sectarian didn’t disappear into the fog, and there was a second shot…

‘See, sucker?’ said the area chief to the educator, taking his phrase from the criminal world. They had come to the mine, and the educator did not dare show surprise at the murder, and the area chief didn’t know how to.

‘There’s your experiment for you. These bastards are working worse than before. An extra dinner just gives them extra strength to fight the cold. Remember this: only the cold will squeeze work out of them. Not your dinner and not a punch in the ear from me – only the cold. They wave their hands to get warm. But we put picks and shovels into these hands. What’s the difference what they wave? We set wheelbarrows, boxes, sledges in front of them, and the mine fulfills the plan. Puts out gold…

‘Now they’re full and won’t work at all. Not until they get cold. Then they’ll start moving those shovels. But feeding them is useless. You sure made yourself look like an idiot civilian with that dinner. But we can forgive it the first time. We were all suckers like that at first.’

‘I had no idea they were such slime,’ said the educator.

‘Next time you’ll believe those of us who have experience. We shot one today. A loafer. Ate his government ration six months for nothing. Say it: “loafer”.’

‘Loafer,’ repeated the educator.

I was standing next to them but they saw no need to let that bother them. I had a legitimate reason for waiting: the work gang leader was supposed to bring me a new partner. He brought Lupilov, the former assistant to the Soviet Prosecutor-General. The two of us started tossing dynamited rock into large boxes. It was the same work that the sectarian and I used to do.

Later we returned along the same road, as usual not having met our quota, but not caring about it either. But somehow it didn’t seem as cold as usual.

We tried to work, but our lives were too distant from anything that could be expressed in figures, wheelbarrows, or percent of plan. The figures were

a mockery. But for an hour, for one moment after that night's dinner, we got our strength back.

And suddenly I realized that that night's dinner had given the sectarian the strength he needed for his suicide. He needed that extra portion of kasha to make up his mind to die. There are times when a man has to hurry so as not to lose his will to die.

As usual, we encircled the stove. But today there was no one to sing any hymns. And I guess I was even happy that it was finally quiet.

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# *Grishka Logun's Thermometer*

We were so exhausted that we collapsed in the snow beside the road before going home.

Instead of yesterday's forty degrees below zero, today was only thirteen below and the day seemed summery.

Grishka Logun, the foreman of the work area next to ours, walked past in an unbuttoned sheepskin coat. He was carrying a pick handle in his hand. Grishka was young, hot-tempered, and had an amazingly red face. Very low on the camp's administrative ladder, he was often unable to resist the temptation to put his own shoulder to a snowbound truck, to help pick up a log, or to break loose a box of earth frozen into the snow. All these were acts clearly beneath the dignity of a foreman, but he kept forgetting the loftiness of his position.

Vinogradov's work gang was coming down the road toward us. They were no better a lot than we were: the same former mayors and party leaders, university professors, middle-rank military officers…

People crowded timidly to the edge of the road; they were returning from work and were letting Grishka Logun pass. But he stopped too. The gang had been working in his sector. Vinogradov, a talkative man who had been the director of a mechanized tractor station in the Ukraine, stepped forward.

Logun and Vinogradov were too far from where we were sitting for us to be able to hear what they were saying, but we could understand everything without the words. Vinogradov, waving his hands, was explaining something to Logun. Then Logun poked the pick handle into Vinogradov's chest, and Vinogradov fell backward… Vinogradov didn't get up, and Logun jumped on him and began to kick him, brandishing his pick handle all the while. None of the twenty men in his work gang made the slightest move to defend their leader. Logun picked up his hat, which had fallen in

the snow, and walked on. Vinogradov got up as if nothing had happened. The rest of the group (the work gang was passing us) didn't express the slightest sympathy or indignation. When he reached us, Vinogradov twisted his broken bleeding lips into a wry smile: 'That Logun's got a real thermometer,' he said. 'The thieves call kicking a man that way "dancing",' Vavilov said. 'It's a sort of Russian folk-dance.'

Vavilov was an acquaintance of mine. We had arrived together at the mine from the same Butyr Prison. 'What do you think of that?' I said. 'We have to make some decision. No one beat us yesterday, but they might tomorrow. What would you do if Logun did to you what he just did to Vinogradov?'

'I guess I'd take it,' Vavilov answered quietly. And I understood that he had been contemplating the inevitability of a beating for a long time.

Later I realized that it was all a matter of physical superiority when gang leaders, overseers, orderlies, or any unarmed persons were concerned. As long as I was strong, no one struck me. As soon as I weakened, everyone would. I would be beaten by the orderly, the worker in the bathhouse, the barber, the cook, the foreman, the work-gang foreman, and even the weakest criminal. The guard's strength was in his rifle.

The strength of the superior beating me was in the law, in the court, the tribunal, the guards, the troops. It was not hard for him to be stronger than I. The strength of the criminal element was in their numbers, the fact that they stuck together, that they could cut a man's throat over a couple of words. (I saw that happen more than once.) But I was still strong. I could be beaten by the director, the guard, the thief, but the orderly, the foreman, and the barber still couldn't beat me.

Poliansky, an erstwhile physical education teacher who now received a lot of food packages and never shared any of them with anyone, said to me in a tone of reproach that he simply could not comprehend how people could allow themselves to be reduced to such a condition. He was even indignant when I didn't agree with him. Before the year was up, however, I again met Poliansky – already a real 'goner' picking up cigarette butts and eager to scratch the heels of any important thief in camp (a common ritual of servility that was thought to encourage relaxation).

Poliansky was honest. His secret torments were strong enough to break through ice, through death, through indifference and beatings, through hunger, sleeplessness, and fear.

Once we had a holiday; on holidays we were all placed under lock and key, and this was called ‘holiday isolation’. And there were people who met old friends, made new acquaintances, and confided in each other during this ‘isolation’. No matter how terrible or how degrading isolation was, it was, nevertheless, easier than work for political prisoners convicted under Article 58 of the criminal code. Isolation was, after all, an opportunity to relax – even for a minute, and who could say how much time it would take for us to return to our former bodies – a minute, a day, a year, or a century? No one could hope to return to his former soul. And, of course, no one did.

But to get back to Poliansky, my bunk neighbor on that ‘isolation day’, he was honest.

‘I’ve wanted to ask you something for a long time.’

‘What about?’

‘I used to watch you a few months ago – the way you walk, how you can’t step over a log any dog would jump over, how you drag your feet on the stones, and how the slightest bump on your path seems an impossible barrier and causes palpitations, heavy breathing, and requires long rest. I watched you and thought: what a bum, a loafer, an experienced bastard, an imposter.’

‘And now? Have you understood anything?’

‘I understood later. I did – when I got weak myself. When everyone began to push me and beat me. Man knows no sensation more pleasant than to realize that someone else is still weaker, still worse off than he.’

‘Why are “heroes of communist labor” always invited to production meetings? Why is physical strength a moral measure? “Physically stronger” means “better than me, morally superior to me”. How could it be otherwise? One man picks up a 400-pound boulder, and I’m bent over with a twenty-pound stone.’

‘I’ve realized all that now – I wanted to tell you.’

‘Thanks even for that.’

Not long after that Poliansky died. He fell in one of the test pits. The foreman struck him in the face with his fist. The foreman was not Grishka Logun, but one of us – Firsov, a military man convicted under Article 58.

I remember very well how I was struck the first time. It was the first of hundreds of blows that I experienced daily, nightly.

It’s impossible to remember all the blows one experiences, but I remember the first very well. I was even prepared for it by Grishka Logun’s

behavior and Vavilov's meekness.

In the cold, in the hunger of the fourteen-hour workday, of the frosty white cloud of the rocky gold-mine, happiness abruptly flitted my way, and an act of charity was thrust into my hand by a passer-by. This charity did not take the form of bread or medicine; it was in the form of time, an unscheduled relaxation.

The overseer of the ten men working in our sector was Zuev, then a free man, but he had once been a convict and knew what it was like to be in a convict's hide.

There was something in Zuev's eyes – sympathy, perhaps, for the thorny fate of humanity.

Power corrupts. The beast hidden in the soul of man and released from its chain lusts to satisfy its age-old natural instinct – to beat, to murder. I don't know if it's possible to receive satisfaction from signing a death sentence, but in this, too, there is doubtless some dark pleasure, some fantasy which seeks no justification.

I have seen people – many people – who had ordered the shooting of others and who were now themselves being killed. There was nothing but cowardice in them as they shouted: 'I'm not the one who should be killed for the good of the state. I too am able to kill.'

I don't know people who gave orders to kill. I only saw them from a distance. But I think that the order to shoot another man derives from that same spiritual strength, that same psychological foundation as the actual shooting itself, as murdering with one's own hands.

Power is corruption. The intoxication of power over people, irresponsibility, the willingness to mock, to degrade, to encourage all these things when necessary – all these are the moral measure of a supervisor's career.

But Zuev beat us less than the others did; we were lucky.

We had just arrived for work and were crowded together in a small area protected from the sharp wind by a cliff. Covering his face with his mittens, our foreman, Zuev, walked up, and sent the men off to the various mine shafts to work. I was left behind with nothing to do.

'I want to ask a favor of you,' Zuev said, choking with his own boldness. 'A favor – not an order! I want you to write a letter for me to Kalinin. To wipe out my prison record. I'll explain it all to you.'

We went to the foreman’s small shed where a stove crackled and where we were not normally allowed to enter. Any convict who dared open the door to breathe the hot breath of life even for a minute would immediately be driven out by fists and knees.

Animal instinct led us to this cherished door. Requests would be invented – what time is it? Or it might be a question – should the excavation go to the right or the left?

‘Can you give me a light?’

‘Is Zuev here? How about Dobriakov?’

But these requests deceived no one in the shed. People were literally kicked through the open doors into the frost. Even so, there had been a moment of warmth…

But no one threw me out; I was sitting right next to the stove.

‘Who’s that, the lawyer?’ someone hissed contemptuously.

‘That’s right, Pavel Ivanovich. He was recommended to me.’

‘All right.’ It was the senior foreman condescending to recognize the needs of his subordinate.

Zuev’s case (he’d served out his sentence the previous year) was the most ordinary village affair. It all began with support payments for his parents, who had him sent to prison. His sentence was almost up when the prison authorities managed to have him sent to Kolyma. Colonization of the area demanded a firm line in creating barriers to departure, government assistance, and unflagging attention to arrivals and human shipments to Kolyma. Transporting convicts there was the simplest way of rendering the difficult land livable.

Zuev wanted to quit Far Northern Construction, and he was asking to have his prison record wiped out or at least to be allowed to return to the mainland.

It was difficult for me to write, and not just because my hands were rough and my fingers so permanently bent around the handle of a pick and axe that unbending them was unbelievably difficult. I managed to wrap a thick rag around pen and pencil to give them the thickness of a pick or shovel handle.

When I realized I could do that, I was ready to form letters.

It was difficult to write because my brain had become as coarse as my hands; like my hands, it too was oozing blood. I had to call back to life – to resurrect – words that, as I then thought, had left my life for ever.

I wrote the letter, sweating and rejoicing. It was hot in the shed, and the lice immediately began to stir and crawl over my body. I couldn't scratch for fear of being driven out into the cold. I was afraid of inspiring revulsion in my savior.

By evening I had written the complaint to Kalinin. Zuev thanked me and thrust a ration of bread into my hand. I had to eat the ration immediately; everything had to be devoured immediately and not laid aside until the next day. I had learned that lesson already.

The day was coming to an end – according to the foreman's watches only, for the fog was identical in the morning, at midnight, and at noon. We were led home.

I slept and had my perpetual Kolyma dream – loaves of bread floating through the air, filling all the houses, all the streets, the entire planet.

In the morning I waited to meet Zuev; maybe he'd give me a smoke.

And Zuev came. Making no effort to conceal anything from the work gang or the guards, he dragged me out of the wind shelter and roared at me.

'You cheated me, you bastard!'

He had read the letter that night. He didn't like it. His neighbors, the other foremen, also read it and didn't approve of it either. Too dry. Too few tears. It was useless to send that kind of letter. You couldn't get any sympathy from Kalinin with that sort of rot.

The camp had dried up my brain, and I could not, I just could not squeeze another word from it. I was not up to the job – and not because the gap between my will and Kolyma was too great, not because my brain was weak and exhausted, but because in those folds of my brain where ecstatic adjectives were stored, there was nothing but hatred. Just think of poor Dostoevsky writing anguished, tearful, humiliating letters to his unmoved superiors throughout the ten years he spent as a soldier after leaving the House of the Dead. Dostoevsky even wrote poems to the czarina. There was no Kolyma in the House of the Dead.

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# *Chief of Political Control*

The machine wailed and wailed and wailed… The alarm was summoning the hospital director, but the guests were already coming up the stairs. They wore white hospital cloaks, and the shoulders of the cloaks swelled from the epaulettes beneath. The hospital garb was too tight for our military guests.

Two steps in front of them all was a tall, gray-haired man whose name was known to everyone in the hospital, but whom no one had ever seen.

It was Sunday for those hospital employees who were not prisoners, and the hospital director was shooting pool with the doctors. He was winning; everybody lost to the hospital director.

The director immediately recognized the howling siren, rubbed the chalk from his sweaty fingers, and sent a messenger to say that he was coming – right away.

But the guests didn't wait.

'We'll start in the Surgical Block…' In the Surgical Block lay about two hundred persons. Two of the wards held about eighty patients each. One had straight surgical cases: closed fractures, sprains, etc. The other had infected cases. There were also small post-surgery wards and a ward for terminal cases with infections: sepsis, gangrene.

'Where's the surgeon?'

'He went to the village to see his son. The boy goes to school there.'

'Where's the surgeon on duty?'

'He'll be here right away.' But the surgeon on duty, Nurder (whom everyone in the hospital called 'Murder'), was drunk and didn't appear.

The higher-ups were shown around the Surgical Block by the senior orderly, a convict.

'No, we don't need your explanations or case histories. We know how they're written,' the official said to the orderly as he walked into the large

ward and closed the door behind him. ‘And don’t let the hospital director in for the time being.’

One of his aides, a major, took up guard duty at the door to the ward.

‘Listen,’ said the gray-haired official as he stepped out into the center of the ward and gestured at the double row of cots standing along the walls. ‘Listen to me. I’m the new chief of political control at Far North Construction Headquarters. Anyone who has broken bones as a result of injuries he received either in the mines or in the barracks from foremen or brigade leaders, sing out. We’re here to investigate traumatism. The rate of injuries is terrible. But we’re going to put an end to it. Anybody who has received such injuries, tell my aide. Major, write it all down!’ The major unfolded his notebook and got out a fountain pen.

‘Well?’

‘How about frostbite, sir?’

‘No frostbite, only beatings.’

I was the paramedic for the ward. Of the eighty patients, seventy were there with that kind of trauma. It was all written down in their case histories. But not one patient responded to the appeal of the higher-ups. Later on you’d pay for it while you were still lying on your cot. If you shut up, they’d keep you in the hospital for an extra day as payment for your quiet nature and good sense. It was much more advantageous to remain silent.

‘A soldier broke my arm.’

‘A soldier? Can it be that our soldiers beat the prisoners? You can’t mean a guard, but some convict work gang leader.’

‘Yeah, I guess it was a work gang leader.’

‘See what a bad memory you have? My arrival here is not a run-of-the-mill kind of thing. I’m the boss. And we will not permit beatings! In general, rudeness, hooliganism, and swearing has to come to an end. I already gave a talk at a meeting of the Planning Board. I told them that if the director of Far North Construction is impolite in his conversations with the headquarters chief, and the headquarters chief permits himself to use obscene, abusive language with the director of mines, then how does the mine chief talk to the area heads? It’s nothing but a stream of obscenities. But those are still mainland obscenities. The area head chews out his superintendents, work gang leaders, and foremen for using the obscenities of the Kolyma underground world. And what’s left then to the foreman or

work gang leader? All they can do is take a stick and beat on the workers. Isn't that the way it is?'

'Yes, sir,' said the major.

'Nikishov gave a talk at that same conference. He said: "You're new people. You don't know Kolyma. The conditions here are special. Morality is different here." But I told him we came here to work and we will work, not the way Nikishov says, but the way Comrade Stalin says.'

'That's right, sir,' said the major.

When they heard that the matter had reached Stalin, the patients fell silent.

Behind the door was a crowd of area supervisors; they had been summoned from their apartments and were waiting, along with the hospital director, for the speech to end.

'They're removing Nikishov?' Baikov, director of the Second Therapeutic Ward asked quietly, but he was hushed up.

The chief of political control came out of the ward and shook hands with the doctors.

'How about some dinner?' asked the hospital director. 'It's on the table.'

'No, no,' the chief of political control looked at his watch. 'I have to make it to the west area, to Susuman by tonight. We have a meeting tomorrow. But maybe… I don't want to eat, but here's what we can do. Give me the briefcase.' The gray-haired chief took the heavy briefcase from the major's hands.

'Can you give me a glucose injection?'

'Glucose?' asked the hospital director, not understanding.

'Yes, glucose. An intravenous injection. I haven't drunk anything alcoholic since I was a kid… I don't smoke. But every other day I have a glucose injection. Twenty cubic centimeters of glucose intravenously. A doctor in Moscow advised me to do it. Keeps me in great shape. Better than ginseng or testosterone. I always carry the glucose with me, but I don't carry a needle; I can get a needle in any hospital. You can give me the shot.'

'I don't know how,' said the hospital director. 'Let me hold the tourniquet. Here's the surgeon on duty; that's right up his alley.'

'No,' said the surgeon on duty. 'I don't know how to do that either. That can't be done by just any doctor, sir.'

'Well, how about an orderly?'

'We don't have any non-convict orderlies.'

‘How about this one?’

‘He’s a convict.’

‘Funny. But what’s the difference? Can you do it?’

‘I can,’ I said.

‘Sterilize a syringe…’

I boiled a syringe and cooled it. The gray-haired chief took a box with ‘glucose’ from his briefcase, and the hospital director poured some alcohol on his arm. With the assistance of the party organizer, he broke the glass seal and drew the solution into the syringe. The hospital director attached a needle to the syringe, handed it to me, and tightened the rubber tourniquet on the man’s arm; I gave him the shot and pressed the place with a cotton wad.

‘I have veins like a truck-driver,’ the chief joked graciously with me.

I said nothing.

‘Well, I’ve rested; it’s time to get on the road.’ The gray-haired chief got up.

‘How about the therapeutic wards?’ asked the hospital director, afraid that if the guests had to return to examine the therapeutic patients, he would get chewed out for not having reminded them in time.

‘There’s no reason for us to visit the therapeutic wards,’ said the chief of political control. ‘We’re pursuing a specific goal on this trip.’

‘How about dinner?’

‘No dinners. Business comes first.’

The car of the chief of political control roared to life and disappeared into the frozen dark.

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# *The Life of Engineer Kipreev*

For many years I thought that death was a form of life. Comforted by the vagueness of this notion, I attempted to work out a positive formula to preserve my own existence in this vale of tears.

I believed a person could consider himself a human being as long as he felt totally prepared to kill himself, to interfere in his own biography. It was this awareness that gave me the will to live. I checked myself – frequently – and felt I had the strength to die, and thus remained alive.

Much later I realized that I had simply built myself a refuge, avoided the problem, for when at the critical moment the decision between life and death became an exercise of the will, I would not be the same man as before. I would inevitably weaken, become a traitor, betray myself. Instead of thinking of death, I simply felt that my former decision needed some other answer, that my promises to myself, the oaths of youth, were naïve and very artificial. It was Engineer Kipreev's story that convinced me.

I never in my life betrayed or sold anyone down the river. But I don't know how I would have held out if they had beaten me. I passed through all stages of the investigation, by the greatest good luck, without beatings – 'method number three'. My investigators never laid a finger on me. This was chance, nothing more. It was simply that I was interrogated early – in the first half of 1937, before they resorted to torture.

Engineer Kipreev, however, was arrested in 1938, and he could vividly imagine the beatings. He survived the blows and even attacked his investigator. Beaten still more, he was thrown into a punishment cell. Nevertheless, the investigators obtained his signature easily: they threatened to arrest his wife, and Kipreev 'signed'.

Throughout his life Kipreev carried with him this terrible weight on his conscience. There are more than a few humiliations and degradations in the

life of a prisoner. The diaries of members of Russia's liberation movement are marked by one traumatic act – the request for a pardon. Before the revolution this was considered a mark of eternal shame. Even after the revolution former political prisoners and exiles refused to receive anyone who had ever asked the czar for freedom or for a reduction of sentence.

In the thirties, not only were petitioners for pardons forgiven but also those who had signed confessions that incriminated both themselves and others, often with bloody consequences.

Representatives of the former unyielding view had long since grown old and perished in exile or in the camps. Those who had been imprisoned and had passed through the process of investigation were all 'petitioners'.

For this reason no one ever knew what moral torments Kipreev subjected himself to in his departure for the Sea of Okhotsk – to Vladivostok and Magadan.

Kipreev had been a physicist and engineer at the Kharkov Physical Institute, where the first Soviet experiments with nuclear reactions were conducted. The nuclear scientist Kur-chatov worked there. The purges had not passed over the Kharkov Institute, and Kipreev became one of the first victims of our atomic science.

Kipreev knew his own true worth, but his superiors did not. Moreover, moral stamina has little connection with talent, with scientific experience, or even with the love of science. Aware of the beatings at the interrogations, Kipreev prepared to act in the simplest manner – to fight back like a beast, to answer blow with blow without caring whether his tormentor was simply carrying out, or had personally invented, 'method number three'. Kipreev was beaten and thrown into a punishment cell. Everything began again. His physical strength betrayed him, and then so did his moral stamina. Kipreev 'signed'. They threatened to arrest his wife. Kipreev knew endless shame became of this weakness, because he, an educated man, had collapsed when he encountered brute force. Right there in the prison Kipreev swore an oath never again to repeat his shameful act. But then, Kipreev was the only one who perceived his act as shameful. On the neighboring bunks lay other men who had also signed confessions and committed slander. They lay there and did not die. Shame has no boundaries. Or, rather, the boundaries are always personal, and each resident of an interrogation cell sets standards for himself.

Kipreev arrived in Kolyma with a five-year sentence, confident that he would find the path to early release to the mainland. An engineer had to be of value. An engineer could always earn credit for extra working days, be released, have his sentence shortened. While Kipreev had nothing but contempt for physical labor in camp, he quickly realized that only death waited at the end of that path. If he could just find a job where he could apply even a tenth of his technical skills, he would obtain his freedom. At the very least, he would retain his skills.

Experience at the mine, fingers broken in the scraper, physical exhaustion, and emaciation brought Kipreev to the hospital and from there to the transit prison.

The engineer's problem was that he could not resist the temptation to invent; he could not restrain himself from searching for scientific and technical solutions to the chaos that he saw all around him.

As for the camp and its directors, they looked upon Kipreev as a slave, nothing more. Kipreev's energy, for which he had cursed himself a thousand times, sought an outlet.

The stakes in this game had to be worthy of an engineer and a scientist. The stakes were freedom.

There is a brief ironic verse about Kolyma that describes it as a strange or wonderful planet; nine months is winter and the rest is summer:

> Kolyma, Kolyma – chudnaya planeta,
> Deviat' mesiatsev zima,
> Ostal'noe – leto.

This is not the only strange thing about Kolyma. During the war, people paid a hundred rubles for an apple, and an error in the distribution of fresh tomatoes from the mainland led to bloody dramas. All this – the apples and the tomatoes – was for the civilian world, to which Kipreev did not belong. It was a strange planet not only because the taiga was the law, nor because it was a Stalinist death camp. And it wasn't strange just because there was a shortage there of cheap tobacco and the special tea leaves used to make *chifir*, a powerful, almost narcotic drink. *Chifir* leaves and cheap tobacco were the currency of Kolyma, its true gold, and they were used to acquire everything else.

The biggest shortage, however, was of glass – glass objects, laboratory glassware, instruments. The cold increased the fragility of glass, but the permitted ‘breakage’ was not increased. A simple medical thermometer cost 300 rubles, but there were no underground bazaars that sold thermometers. The doctor had to present a formal request to the head of medical services for the entire region, since a medical thermometer was harder to hide than the *Mona Lisa*. But the doctor never presented any such request. He simply paid 300 rubles out of his own pocket and brought the thermometer with him from home to take the temperature of the critically ill.

In Kolyma a tin can is a poem. It is a convenient measuring cup that is always at hand. Water, various grains, flour, pudding, soup, tea can be stored in it. It is a mug from which to drink *chifir*. It is also a good vessel in which to brew *chifir*. The mug is sterile, since it has been purified by fire. Soup and tea can be heated in a tin can – either on a stove or over a camp-fire.

A three-liter tin can fastened to the belt with a wire handle is the classic cooking pot of every ‘goner’. And who in Kolyma has not been or will not eventually become a ‘goner’?

In a wooden window-frame, tiny pieces of broken glass, like cells, are arranged to serve as panes to let in light. A transparent jar can conveniently be used to store medication in the outpatient clinic. In the camp cafeteria, a pint jar is a serving dish for fruit compote.

But neither thermometers, nor laboratory glassware, nor simple jars make up the principal shortage of glass in Kolyma – the shortage of electric light-bulbs.

In Kolyma there are hundreds of mines, thousands of sites, sections, shafts, tens of thousands of mine faces with gold, uranium, lead, and tungsten, thousands of work groups dispatched from the camps, civilian villages, camp zones, guard barracks, and everywhere there is one crying need – light, light, light. Kolyma has no sun, no light for nine months. The raging, never-setting summer sun provides no salvation, for in winter nothing is left of it. Light and energy come from pairs of tractors, or from a locomotive.

Industrial tools, gold washers, mine faces all demand light. Mine faces lit up by floodlights lengthen the night shift and make labor more productive. Electric lights are needed everywhere. Three-hundred-, five-hundred-, one-thousand-watt bulbs are shipped in from the mainland to provide light for

the barracks and the mines, but the uneven supply of electricity from the portable-generator motors guarantees that these bulbs will burn out earlier than they should.

The electric-light-bulb shortage in Kolyma is a national problem. It is not only the mine face that must be lit up but also the camp grounds, the barbed wire and the guard towers, which are built in greater and not lesser quantities in the Far North.

The guards on duty must have light. In the mines insufficient light is simply noted in the log, but in camp it might lead to escape attempts. Obviously there is nowhere to escape to from Kolyma, and no one has ever attempted to escape, but the law is the law, and if there isn't sufficient lighting or enough bulbs, burning torches are carried to the outer perimeters of the camp and left there in the snow until morning. A torch is made from a rag soaked in oil or gasoline.

Electric bulbs burn out quickly and cannot be repaired.

Kipreev wrote a note that amazed the chief of Far Eastern Construction. The chief could already feel the medal he would add to his other military decorations (military, not civilian).

It seemed the bulbs could be repaired if the glass was in one piece.

All over Kolyma stern instructions were hurriedly circulated to the effect that burned-out bulbs must be delivered carefully to Magadan. At the industrial complex forty-seven miles from Magadan, a factory for the repair of electric light-bulbs was built. Engineer Kipreev was appointed director of the factory.

All other personnel was civilian. This happy invention was entrusted to the hands of dependable civilians working on contract. Kipreev, however, paid no attention to this circumstance, believing that the creators of the factory could not help but take notice of him.

The result was stupendous. Of course, the bulbs didn't have a long life after being repaired, but Kipreev saved Kolyma a definite quantity of hours and days. There were many of these days, and the state reaped an enormous profit, a military profit, a golden profit.

The chief of Far Eastern Construction was awarded the Order of Lenin. All supervisors who had anything to do with repairing the bulbs received medals also.

Neither Moscow nor Magadan, however, ever considered rewarding the convict Kipreev. For them Kipreev was a slave, an intelligent slave, but

nothing more. Nevertheless, the chief of Far Eastern Construction did not consider it possible to forget all about his pen-pal in the taiga.

A celebration of great pomp took place in Kolyma, a celebration so great that a small group of people in Moscow took note of it. It was held in honor of the chief of Far Eastern Construction, of all those who had received medals and official expressions of gratitude for work well done. Aside from the official expressions of gratitude for work well done, aside from the official governmental decree, the chief of Far Eastern Construction had also issued bonuses, awards, and official expressions of gratitude. All those who participated in bulb repair, all the foremen of the factory with the bulb-repair shop were presented with American packages, in addition to the medals and certificates. These packages, which had been received during the war under Lend-Lease, contained suits, neckties, and shoes. One of the suits had evidently disappeared during delivery, but the shoes were of red American leather and had thick soles – the dream of every foreman.

The chief of Far Eastern Construction consulted with his right-hand man, and they came to the conclusion that there could be no higher dream for a convict-engineer. As for shortening his sentence or releasing him altogether, the chief would not even dream of asking Moscow about that in such troubled political times. A slave should be satisfied with his master’s old shoes and suit.

All Kolyma buzzed about these presents – literally all Kolyma. The local foremen received more than enough medals and official expressions of gratitude, but an American suit and American shoes with thick soles were in the same category as a trip to the moon or another planet.

The solemn evening arrived, and the cardboard boxes gleamed on a table covered with a red cloth.

The chief of Far Eastern Construction read from a paper in which Kipreev’s name was not mentioned, could not be mentioned. Then he read aloud the list of those who were to receive presents. Kipreev’s name came last in the list. The engineer stepped up to the table which was brightly lit – by his light-bulbs – and took the box from the hands of the chief of Far Eastern Construction.

Enunciating each word distinctly, Kipreev said in a loud voice: ‘I won’t wear American hand-me-downs.’ Then he put the box back on the table.

Kipreev was arrested on the spot and sentenced to an additional eight years. I don’t know precisely which article of the criminal code was cited,

but in any case that is meaningless in Kolyma and interests no one.

But then, what sort of article could have covered the refusing of American presents? And that wasn't the only thing. There was more. In concluding the case against Kipreev, the investigator said: 'He said that Kolyma was Auschwitz without the ovens.'

Kipreev accepted his new sentence calmly. He was aware of the likely consequences when he refused the American presents. Nevertheless, he did take certain measures to ensure his personal safety. These measures consisted of asking a friend to write to his wife on the mainland to tell her that he had died. Second, he himself gave up writing letters.

The engineer was removed from the factory and sent to hard labor. The war was soon over, and the system of camps became even more complex. As a persistent offender, Kipreev knew he would be sent to a secret camp with no address – merely a number.

The engineer fell ill and ended up in the central prison hospital. There was a compelling need for Kipreev's skills there: an X-ray machine had to be assembled from old machine parts and junk. The chief physician, whose name was 'Doctor', promised to get Kipreev released or at least to get his sentence shortened. Engineer Kipreev had little faith in such promises, because he was classified as a patient, and special work credit could be received only by staff employees of the hospital. Still, it was tempting to believe in this promise, and the X-ray lab was not the gold-mine.

It was here that we learned of Hiroshima.

'That's the bomb we were working on in Kharkov.'

'That's why Forrestal[*] committed suicide. He couldn't bear all those telegrams.'

'Do you understand why? It's a very hard thing for a Western intellectual to make the decision to drop the bomb. Psychic depression, insanity, and suicide is the price that the Western intellectual pays for decisions like that. A Russian Forrestal wouldn't have lost his mind.'

'How many good people have you met in your life? I mean real people, the kind you want to imitate and serve.'

'Let me think: Miller, the engineer arrested for sabotage, and maybe five others.'

'That's a lot.'

The General Assembly signed the agreement on genocide.

‘Genocide? Is that something they serve for dinner?’

We signed the convention. Of course, 1937 was not genocide. It was the destruction of the enemies of the people. There was no reason not to sign the convention.

‘They’re really tightening the screws. We cannot be silent. It’s just like the sentence in the child’s primer: “We are not slaves; no one’s slaves are we.” We have to do something, if only to demonstrate to ourselves that we are still people.’

‘The only thing you can demonstrate to yourself is your own stupidity. To live, to survive – that’s the task at hand. We mustn’t stumble. Life is more serious than you think.’

Mirrors do not preserve memories. It is difficult to call the object that I keep hidden in my suitcase a mirror. It is a piece of glass that looks like the surface of some muddy river. The river has been muddied and will stay dirty for ever, because it has remembered something important, something eternally important. It can no longer be the crystal, transparent flow of water that is clear right down to its bed. The mirror is muddied and no longer reflects anything. But once the glass was a real mirror – a present unselfishly given that I carried with me through two decades of camp life, through civilian life that differed little from the camps, and everything that followed the twentieth party congress, when Khruschev denounced Stalin.

The mirror that Kipreev gave me was not part of any business scheme on his part. It was an experiment conducted in the darkness of the X-ray room. I made a wooden frame for this piece of mirror. That is, I ordered it; I didn’t make it myself. The frame is still in one piece. It was made by a Latvian carpenter who was a patient recovering in the hospital. He made it in exchange for a ration of bread. At that time I could permit myself to give up a ration of bread for such a purely personal, totally frivolous wish.

I am holding the mirror in front of me right now. The frame is crudely made, painted with the oil-paint used for floors; they were renovating the hospital, and the carpenter asked for a smidgen of paint. Later I shellacked the frame, but the shellac wore off long ago. You can’t see anything in the mirror any more, but I used to shave before it at Oimyakon, and all the civilian employees envied me. They envied me until 1953 when some

civilian, some smart civilian, sent a package of cheap mirrors to the village. These tiny mirrors – some round and some square – should have cost a few kopecks, but they were sold for sums reminiscent of the prices paid for electric light-bulbs. Nevertheless, everyone withdrew his money from his savings account and bought one. The mirrors were sold in a day, in an hour. After that, my home-made mirror ceased to be the envy of my guests.

I keep the mirror with me. It is not an amulet. I don't know whether it brings luck. Perhaps the mirror attracts and reflects rays of evil, keeping me from dissolving in the human stream, where no one except me knows Kolyma and the engineer, Kipreev.

Kipreev was indifferent to his surroundings. A thief, a hardened criminal with a modicum of education, was invited by the administration to learn the secrets of the X-ray laboratory. It is always hard to tell if the criminals in camp are using their own real names, but this one called himself Rogov, and he was studying under Kipreev's tutelage. The hope was that he would learn to pull the right levers at the right time.

The administration had big plans, and they certainly weren't terribly concerned about Rogov, the criminal. Nevertheless, Rogov ensconced himself in the lab together with Kipreev, and watched him, reported on his actions, and participated in this governmental function as a proletarian friend of the people. He was constantly informing and made conversation and visits impossible. Even if he didn't interfere, he was constantly spying and was a model of vigilance.

This was the primary intent of the administration. Kipreev was to prepare his own replacement – from the criminal world. As soon as Rogov acquired the necessary skills, he would have a lifelong profession, and Kipreev would be sent to Berlag, a nameless camp identified only by number and intended for recidivists.

Kipreev realized all of this, but he had no intention of opposing his fate. He instructed Rogov without any concern for himself.

Kipreev was lucky in that Rogov was a poor student. Like any common criminal, Rogov knew what was most important – that the administration would not forget the criminal element under any circumstances. He was an inattentive student. Nevertheless, his hour came, and Rogov declared that he could do the job, and Kipreev was sent off to a numbered camp. But the X-ray lab somehow broke down, and the doctors had Kipreev returned to the hospital. Once more the lab began to function.

It was about this time that Kipreev began experimenting with the optic blind.

The dictionary of foreign words published in 1964 defines the ‘blind’ as follows: ‘a diaphragm (a shutter with variable-size opening) which is used in photography, microscopy, and fluoroscopy.’

Twenty years earlier the word ‘blind’ was not listed in the dictionary of foreign words. It is a creation of the war period, an invention having to do with electron microscopes.

Somewhere Kipreev found a torn sheet from a technical journal, and the blind was used in the X-ray laboratory in the convict hospital on the left bank of the Kolyma River.

The blind was Kipreev’s pride and joy – his hope, albeit a weak hope. A report was given at a medical conference and also sent to Moscow. There was no response.

‘Can you make a mirror?’

‘Of course.’

‘A full-length mirror?’

‘Any kind you like, as long as I have the silver for it.’

‘Will silver spoons do?’

‘They’ll be fine.’

Thick glass intended for the desks of senior bureaucrats was requisitioned from the warehouse and brought to the X-ray laboratory.

The first experiment was unsuccessful, and Kipreev fell into a rage and broke the mirror with a hammer. One of the fragments became my mirror – a present from Kipreev.

On the second occasion everything worked out successfully, and the bureaucrat realized his dream – a full-length mirror.

It never occurred to the bureaucrat to thank Kipreev. Whatever for? Even a literate slave ought to be grateful for the privilege of occupying a hospital bed. If the blind had attracted the attention of the higher-ups, the bureaucrat would have received a letter of commendation, nothing more. Now, the mirror – that was something real. But the blind was a very nebulous thing. Kipreev was in total agreement with his boss.

But falling asleep at night on his cot in the corner of the lab and waiting for the latest woman to leave the embraces of his pupil, assistant and informer, Kipreev could not believe either himself or Kolyma. The blind

was not a joke. It was a technical feat. But neither Moscow nor Magadan was in the least interested in engineer Kipreev's invention.

In camp, letters are not answered, nor are reminders of unanswered letters appreciated. The prisoner has to wait – for luck, an accidental meeting.

All this was wearing on the nerves – assuming they were still whole, untorn, and capable of being worn out.

Hope always shackles the convict. Hope is slavery. A man who hopes for something alters his conduct and is more frequently dishonest than a man who has ceased to hope. As long as the engineer waited for a decision on the damned blind, he kept his mouth shut, ignoring all the appropriate and inappropriate jokes that his immediate superior permitted himself – not to mention those of his own assistant who was only waiting for the hour and the day when he could take over. Rogov had even learned to make mirrors, so he was guaranteed a 'rake-off'.

Everyone knew about the blind, and everyone joked about Kipreev – including the pharmacist Kruglyak, who ran the Party organization at the hospital. This heavy-faced man was not a bad sort, but he had a bad temper, and – mainly – he had been taught that a prisoner is scum. As for this Kipreev… The pharmacist had come to the hospital only recently, and he did not know the history of the electric light-bulbs. He never gave any thought to the difficulties of assembling an X-ray laboratory in the taiga, in the Far North.

As the pharmacist phrased it in the slang of the criminal world that he had recently acquired, Kipreev's invention was a 'dodge'.

Kruglyak sneered at Kipreev in the procedure room of the surgical ward. The engineer grabbed a stool and was about to strike the Party secretary, but the stool was ripped from his hands, and he was led away to the ward.

Kipreev either would have been shot or sent to a penal mine, a so-called special zone, which is worse than being shot. He had many friends at the hospital, however, and not just because of his mirrors. The affair of the electric light-bulbs was well-known and recent. People wanted to help him. But this was Point 8 of Article 58 – terrorist activities.

The women doctors went to the head of the hospital, Vinokurov. Vinokurov had no use for Kruglyak. Moreover, he valued Kipreev and he was expecting a response to his report on the blind. And, mainly, he was not a vicious person. He was an official who didn't use his position to do evil.

A careerist who feathered his own bed, Vinokurov did not go out of his way to help anyone, but he did not wish them evil either.

‘All right, I won’t forward the papers to the prosecutor’s office under one condition,’ Vinokurov said. ‘Provided there isn’t any report from the victim, Kruglyak. If he submits a report, the matter will go to trial. And a penal mine is the least Kipreev can get.’

Kruglyak’s male friends spoke to him.

‘Don’t you understand that he’ll be shot? He has none of the rights that we have.’

‘He raised his hand at me.’

‘He didn’t raise his hand, no one saw that. Now if I had a disagreement with you, I’d let you have it in the snout after two words. Don’t you ever quit?’

Kruglyak was not really a bad person, and he certainly wouldn’t do as a bigwig in Kolyma. He agreed not to send in a report.

Kipreev remained in the hospital. A month passed, and Major-General Derevyanko arrived. He was second-in-charge to the chief of Far Eastern Construction, and he was the supreme authority for the prisoners.

High-placed officials liked to stop at the hospital. They could always find quarters, and there was no shortage of food, liquor, and relaxation.

Major-General Derevyanko donned a white coat and strolled from one ward to another to stretch his legs before dinner. The major-general was in a good mood, and Vinokurov decided to take a chance.

‘I have a prisoner here who has performed an important service for the state.’

‘What sort of service is that?’

The head of the hospital explained roughly what a blind was.

‘I want to request that he be granted an early release.’

The major-general asked about the prisoner’s background, and when he heard the answer, he grunted.

‘The only thing that I can tell you,’ the major-general said, ‘is that you should forget about any blinds, and send this engineer… Korneev…’

‘Kipreev, sir.’

‘That’s right, Kipreev. Ship him off to where his papers say he should be.’

‘Yes, sir.’

A week later Kipreev was sent off, and in another week the X-ray machine broke down, so that he had to be recalled to the hospital.

It was no joking matter now, and Vinokurov lived in fear of the major-general's anger. He would never believe that the X-ray machine had broken down. Kipreev's papers were again prepared for him to be sent off, but he fell ill and remained.

It was now utterly impossible for him to return to the X-ray laboratory. He realized this quite clearly.

Kipreev had mastoiditis; he had picked up the inflammation from sleeping on a camp cot. His condition was critical, but no one wanted to believe his temperature or the reports of the doctors. Vinokurov raged and demanded that the operation be performed as soon as possible.

The hospital's best surgeons prepared to perform Kipreev's mastoidectomy. The surgeon, Braude, was virtually a specialist in mastoidectomies. There were more than enough colds in Kolyma, and Braude had had the experience of performing hundreds of such operations. But Braude was only the assistant. Novikov, a well-known otolaryngologist and a student of Volchek, had worked for Far Eastern Construction for many years, and she was to perform the operation. Novikov had never been a prisoner nor was she after the hardship pay (commonly referred to as 'the long ruble'), but there, in Kolyma, she was not condemned for her entrenched alcoholism. After her husband's death, this talented and beautiful woman had wandered for years about the Far North. She would begin things brilliantly but then would lose control for weeks on end.

Novikov was about fifty, and there was no one more qualified than she. At this moment she was dead drunk, but she was coming out of it, and the head of the hospital allowed Kipreev's operation to be held up for a few days.

Novikov sobered up, her hands stopped shaking, and she performed Kipreev's operation brilliantly. It was a parting gift, a purely medical gift to her former X-ray technician. Braude assisted her, and Kipreev recuperated in the hospital.

Kipreev realized that there was nothing left to hope for and that he would not be kept in the hospital for even one extra hour.

A numbered camp waited for him, where convicts walked in rows of five, elbow to elbow, with thirty dogs surrounding a column of prisoners.

Even in this hopeless state Kipreev did not betray himself. The head of the ward prescribed a special diet for the convict-engineer recovering from a mastoidectomy, a serious operation. Kipreev declared that there were many patients more seriously ill than he among the ward's three hundred patients and that they had a greater right to a special diet.

And they took Kipreev away.

For fifteen years I searched for engineer Kipreev and finally dedicated a play to his memory – an effective way of guaranteeing a man's involvement with the nether world.

But it was not enough to write a play about Kipreev and dedicate it to his memory. A woman friend of mine was sharing an apartment in the center of Moscow, and it wasn't until she got a new neighbor through an ad in the paper that I finally found Kipreev.

The new woman came out of her room to become acquainted with her neighbors and saw the play dedicated to Kipreev. She picked it up: 'The initials are the same as those of a friend of mine. But he's not in Kolyma; he's in a different place.' My friend phoned me. I refused to continue the conversation. It was an error. Besides, in the play the hero is a doctor. Kipreev was a physical engineer.

'That's right, a physical engineer.'

I got dressed and went to see my friend's new neighbor.

Fate weaves complex patterns. Why? Why did the will of fate have to be so clearly demonstrated by this series of coincidences? We seek each other little, but fate takes our lives in her hands.

Engineer Kipreev was alive in the Far North. He had been released ten years earlier. Before that, he had been brought to Moscow and had worked in secret camps. When he was released, he returned to the North. He wanted to remain there until he reached pension age.

Engineer Kipreev and I met.

'I'll never be a scientist – just an ordinary engineer. How could I return, stripped of all my rights and ignorant of what has happened in my field? The people I studied with are all laureates of various prizes.'

'But that's nonsense!'

'No, it's not nonsense. I breathe easier in the North. And I'll continue breathing easier right up to my pension.'

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# *Mister Popp's Visit*

Mr Popp was director of an American firm that was installing gasholders in the initial construction phase of the Berezniki Chemical Factory. It was a large order, the work was going well, and the vice-president considered it essential to be present in person when the equipment was to be turned over to its new owners.

Various firms were participating in the construction of the factory. Granovsky, the construction director, called it a capitalist international. The Germans were installing Hanomag boilers; the English firm Brown & Bovery was building the steam engines; and the Americans were installing the gasholders. The Germans were behind schedule; later this was declared to be sabotage. At the Central Power Station, the English were also behind schedule; later this too was declared to be sabotage.

At the time I was working at the Central Power Station, and I remember well the arrival of Mr Holmes, chief engineer of the firm Babcock & Wilcox. Holmes was met by Granovsky at the train station, but instead of going to his hotel, the English engineer went straight to where the boilers were being installed. One of the English installers helped Holmes out of his coat and gave him some working clothes, and Holmes spent three hours in the boiler listening to the mechanic's explanations. That evening there was a conference. He responded to all the comments and reports with one short word which the interpreter rendered as: 'Mr Holmes is not concerned with that.' Nevertheless, Holmes spent about two weeks at the factory, and the boiler began to function at twenty percent of planned capacity. Granovsky signed a report to that effect, and Holmes flew back to London.

A few months later the boiler's output began to diminish, and a Soviet engineer, Leonid Ramzin, was called in for consultation. Ramzin had been arrested and tried for conspiracy to overthrow the government. He had been

sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted to ten years' imprisonment with confiscation of property. While serving his sentence, Ramzin was allowed to continue work on the development of a new water-tube boiler which he had designed in 1930, and he was also frequently called on as a consultant. His trial had attracted a lot of attention in the newspapers. Ramzin had not yet been released, had not yet received the Order of Lenin or the Stalin Prize. All that was to come later, but Ramzin already knew about it and conducted himself in a quite independent fashion at the power station. He didn't arrive alone, but with a companion whose appearance was singularly revealing. When Ramzin was done, the man left with him. Ramzin did not crawl into the boiler as Mr Holmes had done but sat in the office of the station's technical director, Kastenner, who had also been exiled and sentenced for sabotage in the mines of Kizel.

The nominal director of the power station was a certain Rachov. He had, in the past, been active in the Party, but he wasn't a bad sort and didn't interfere in matters he didn't understand. At that time, I was working in the efficiency engineer's office, and for many years afterward I carried around with me the written complaint the boiler stokers had sent to Rachov. On the letter, in which the stokers had listed their numerous requests, Rachov had scrawled a characteristically straightforward resolution: 'To the head of the power plant. Look into the matter and refuse them as much as possible.'

Ramzin gave some practical advice but did not have a very high opinion of Holmes's work.

Mr Holmes had always appeared at the station, accompanied not by Granovsky but by his deputy, the chief engineer Chistyakov. Nothing in this life is more dogmatic than diplomatic etiquette. Although Granovsky had all the free time in the world, he considered it beneath him to accompany the foreign firm's chief engineer around the construction site. Of course, if the firm's president were to come…

Mr Holmes was escorted around the site by the engineer, Chistyakov, a heavy, massive man of the type depicted in novels about the Russian gentry. At the factory Chistyakov had an enormous office opposite that of Granovsky. Chistyakov spent many hours there locked up with his young female courier.

I was young then and didn't understand the physiological law that dictated that superiors sleep with their couriers, stenographers, and

secretaries in addition to their wives. I often had business with Chistyakov, and I spent a lot of time swearing outside his locked door.

I then lived next to the soda factory in the same hotel where the writer, Konstantin Paustovsky, composed his *Kara-Bugaz*. Judging by what Paustovsky wrote about that period – 1930–31 – he failed to observe the events which, in the eyes of all our countrymen, colored those years and laid their stamp on the entire history of our society.

Here, right before Paustovsky's eyes, there took place an enormous experiment in the corruption of human souls, an experiment that was to be repeated throughout the country and which would well up in a fountain of blood in 1937. This experiment was the newly developed system of labor camps with its 'reforging' of human souls, food rations, workdays dependent on work accomplished, and the practice of prisoners guarding each other. This system flowered with the construction of the White Sea Canal and collapsed with the construction of the Moscow Canal where to this very day human bones are found in mass graves.

The experiment in Berezniki was conducted by Berzin.* It was not, of course, his personal invention. Berzin could always be counted on to carry out other people's ideas, whether or not they involved the shedding of blood. Berzin was also the director of the Vishera Chemical Factory. Filippov was his subordinate in the camps, but the Vishera camp, which encompassed both Berezniki and Solikamsk with its potassium mines, was enormous. Berezniki alone had three or four thousand people.

It was here that the question of the camps' very existence was decided. Only after the Vishera experiment was judged profitable by the higher-ups did the camps spread all over the Soviet Union. No region was without a camp, no construction site was without convicts. It was only after Vishera that the number of prisoners in the country reached twelve million. Vishera blazed the trail to new areas of confinement. The prisons were handed over to the NKVD, the secret police, whose feats were sung by poets, playwrights, and film producers. Engrossed in his *Kara-Bugaz*, Paustovsky saw none of this.

Toward the end of 1931 I shared a room in the hotel with a young engineer by the name of Levin. He worked at the Berezniki Chemical Factory as an interpreter for the German engineers. When I asked Levin why he worked as a simple interpreter for a salary of only 300 old-style rubles a month when he was a chemical engineer, he answered: 'It's better

this way. I don’t have any responsibility. The factory opening might be delayed for the tenth time, and a hundred people might be arrested, but that doesn’t concern me, because I’m just a translator. Besides, I don’t have much to do, so I have all the free time I need, and I make good use of it.’ Levin smiled.

I smiled back.

‘You don’t understand?’

‘No.’

‘Haven’t you noticed that I don’t get back till morning?’

‘No, I never noticed.’

‘You’re not very observant. I have a job that brings me all the money I need.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I play cards.’

‘Cards?’

‘Yes, poker.’

‘With foreigners?’

‘Why should I play with foreigners? The only thing I could get out of that would be a court trial.’

‘With Russians?’

‘Of course. There are a lot of bachelors here. And the stakes are high. So I have all the money I need. I get along fine and thank my father every day. He taught me to play poker. Want to try? I’ll teach you in no time at all.’

‘No thanks.’

I’ve inserted Levin by accident. I just can’t get started on the story of Mr Popp.

The work of the American firm was moving along at a rapid pace, the order was a large one, and the vice-director decided to come to Russia himself. M. Granovsky, director of the Berezniki Chemical Factory, was informed in advance a thousand times of Mr Popp’s arrival. Granovsky decided that diplomatic protocol would not permit him to go in person to meet Mr Popp. After all, Granovsky was a Party member of long standing, construction chief of the largest project undertaken during the first five-year plan, and he ranked higher than the American businessman. It just wasn’t proper. So Granovsky decided to meet him in his office, and not at the railroad station, Usolye, later renamed Berezniki.

Granovsky knew that the American guest was arriving by special train – just a locomotive and one car. Three days in advance the chief of construction was informed by telegram from Moscow of the arrival time at the Usolye station.

The protocol of meeting was worked out beforehand: the chief of construction's personal car was to be sent to pick up the guest and take him directly to the hotel for foreigners. For the past three days, the director of the hotel, a party lackey by the name of Tsyplyakov, had been keeping the best room vacant. After freshening up and having breakfast, Mr Popp was to be brought to the office where the business part of the meeting had been scheduled to the minute.

The special train with the guest from beyond the seas was to arrive at nine in the morning, and on the previous evening Granovsky's personal chauffeur had been called up, instructed, and sworn at repeatedly.

'Comrade supervisor, maybe I ought to take the car to the station the night before and spend the night there,' the chauffeur fretted.

'Nothing doing. We have to show them that we do everything to the minute. The train whistle blows, and you pull up just as the train pulls in. That's the only way to do things.'

'Yes, sir, comrade supervisor.'

To rehearse the plan, the car was sent empty to the station ten times, and the exhausted chauffeur calculated the exact speed and time. On the night before Mr Popp's arrival, Granovsky's chauffeur fell asleep and dreamt he was on trial…

The chief of construction hadn't honored the garage man with any confidential chats; he awakened the chauffeur when the phone rang with a call from the station.

Granovsky was an active man. He arrived in his office at six a.m. that day, conducted two meetings, and issued three official reprimands. He listened closely to every tiny noise from below, opened the curtains, and peered out the window at the road. There was no guest from beyond the seas.

At nine-thirty the man on duty, the chief of construction, called from the station. Granovsky picked up the receiver and heard a rasping voice with a strong foreign accent. The voice expressed surprise that Mr Popp was inadequately received. There was no car. Mr Popp asked that one be sent.

Granovsky fell into a satanic rage. Rushing down the stairs two at a time, he reached the garage, breathing heavily.

‘Your chauffeur left at seven-thirty, comrade supervisor.’

‘What do you mean at seven-thirty?’

At that moment the car horn honked, and the chauffeur stepped over the threshold of the garage with a drunken grin.

‘What the hell are you doing, you…’

But the chauffeur explained. At seven-thirty the Moscow passenger train had arrived. The head of bookkeeping, Grozovsky, had arrived on it with his family from their vacation and, as always, had taken Granovsky’s car. The chauffeur tried to explain about Mr Popp, but Grozovsky replied that it was all a mistake, that he knew nothing about any of it. He ordered that the car be sent directly to the station, and the chauffeur went after him. The chauffeur thought the whole business with the foreigner had been canceled, and, besides, what with all these Grozovskys and Granovskys, he didn’t know whom to obey. So they all went to the new settlement four kilometers from the station where Grozovsky’s new apartment was located. The chauffeur helped them carry in their things, and they treated him to some vodka.

‘We’ll talk about this later. We’ll see who’s important – Grozovsky or Granovsky? But for now get your ass down to the station.’

The chauffeur screeched into the station just before ten. Mr Popp was not in a good mood.

The chauffeur, too drunk even to recognize the road, nevertheless rushed Mr Popp straight to the hotel for foreigners. Mr Popp was shown his room, where he washed up, changed clothes, and calmed down.

Now the nervous one was Tsyplyakov, commandant of the hotel. That was his title – not ‘director’ or ‘administrator’ but ‘commandant’. I don’t know whether it took more pull to get that position than, say, ‘director of the water-tower’, but that was the title of his position.

Mr Popp’s secretary appeared on the threshold of the commandant’s office: ‘Mr Popp would like breakfast.’

The hotel commandant put two large unwrapped pieces of candy, two sandwiches with preserves and two with sausage, and two glasses of watery tea on a tray and took it to Mr Popp’s room.

The secretary immediately brought the tray back out and set it on the table in the corridor. He was certain Mr Popp would never eat that.

Tsyplyakov rushed off to report to the chief of construction, but Granovsky already knew everything – he had been informed by telephone.

‘You old bitch,’ Granovsky roared into the receiver. ‘You’re shaming me and the government. You just lost your job! This time you’ll learn what work means! I’ll send you to shovel sand in the quarries! Saboteurs! Bastards! You’ll rot in the camps!’

The gray-haired Tsyplyakov waited for his boss to get his fill of swearing and thought to himself: ‘He’ll probably do it too.’

It was time to begin the business part of the meeting, and Granovsky calmed down a little. The firm had done good work at the site. Gasholders had been installed in Berezniki and Solikamsk. Mr Popp was sure to want to see Solikamsk. That was why he had come, and he had no wish to give the impression that he was upset. Why, he wasn’t upset at all. Surprised, maybe, but that was a trivial matter.

Casting aside his diplomatic reservations and canceling all his meetings, Granovsky accompanied Mr Popp personally to the construction site. Granovsky also accompanied Mr Popp to Solikamsk and returned with him. The appropriate documents were signed, and a gratified Mr Popp was ready to return home to America.

‘I have some extra time,’ Mr Popp said to Granovsky. ‘I’ve saved two weeks, thanks to the excellent work of our engineers.’ Here he paused, then continued: ‘And yours too. The Kama is a beautiful river, and I’d like to take a boat trip down it to Perm – or, maybe, to Nizhny Novgorod. Is that possible?’

‘Of course,’ Granovsky said.

‘Can I rent a boat?’

‘No. Our system of government is different from yours, Mr Popp.’

‘Could I buy one?’

‘No, you can’t buy one either.’

‘Well, I guess I can understand that I can’t buy a passenger ship. That might hinder navigation on an important body of water. But how about a tug? Something like that *Chaika* over there?’ Mr Popp pointed at a tug passing by the windows of the chief of construction’s office.

‘No, a tug is out of the question too. You have to understand…’

‘Yes, I’ve heard a lot… Buying one would be the simplest way. I’d leave it in Perm. I’d make a present of it to you.’

‘No, Mr Popp, we can’t accept such gifts.’

‘But what can I do then? It’s absurd. Here we have summer and beautiful weather. This is one of the finest rivers in the world. It’s a real Volga – I read about it. Besides, I have the time. And I can’t leave. Ask Moscow.’

‘Moscow’s far away,’ Granovsky quoted from habit.

‘Well, you decide. I’m your guest. I’ll do whatever you think best.’

Granovsky asked for a half-hour to think things over. He summoned to his office the chief of navigation and Ozols, the local head of the OGPU (the secret police). Granovsky told them about Mr Popp’s desire.

There were only two passenger ships that passed Berezniki – *The Red Urals* and *The Red Tataria*. They connected Cherdyn and Perm. Mironov said that *The Red Urals* was far downstream and couldn’t arrive with any speed. Farther upstream, *The Red Tataria* was approaching Cherdyn. If she turned around right away and made no stops, she could be in Berezniki tomorrow. ‘Your boys would have to help out, Ozols.’ In a word, Mr Popp could have his trip.

‘Get on the telegraph, and tell your boys to get moving. Let one of them get on the boat to make sure they don’t stop off somewhere and waste time. Tell them it’s an important government assignment.’

Ozols contacted Annov, Cherdyn’s dock, and *The Red Tataria* left Cherdyn.

‘Get a move on!’

‘We are.’

The chief of construction visited Mr Popp at his hotel, where the commandant had already been replaced. He announced that a passenger boat would arrive at about two o’clock the next day and would have the privilege of taking an honored guest on board.

‘No,’ Mr Popp said. ‘Give me the exact time so I won’t have to wait around on shore.’

‘At five o’clock then. I’ll send a car for your things at four o’clock.’

At five o’clock Granovsky, Mr Popp, and his secretary arrived at the landing. There was no boat.

Granovsky excused himself and rushed off to the OGPU telegraph.

‘They haven’t even reached Icher yet.’

Granovsky groaned. Icher was at least two hours away.

‘Maybe we ought to return to the hotel and have a snack. We’ll come back when the boat arrives,’ Granovsky suggested.

‘You mean breakfast,’ Mr Popp said expressively. ‘No thank you. It’s a beautiful day with a great sun and sky. We’ll wait here on shore.’

Granovsky remained at the landing with his guest, smiled, made small talk, and kept glancing toward the promontory upstream, where the boat was to appear.

In the meantime Ozols and his men were on the telegraph demanding that things be speeded up.

At eight o’clock *The Red Tataria* appeared from behind the promontory and slowly approached the landing. Granovsky smiled, expressed his thanks, and said goodbye. Mr Popp returned the thanks without a trace of a smile.

As the boat approached the landing, there occurred the difficulty, the delay that almost sent Granovsky and his weak heart to the grave. The difficulty was resolved by the experienced and efficient chief of the regional office, Ozols.

The boat was packed with passengers. These crafts did not run frequently, and there were so many people on board that all the decks, all the cabins, and even the engine room was full. There was no room on *The Red Tataria* for Mr Popp. Not only were all the cabin tickets sold, but each contained secretaries of regional committees, shop supervisors, and directors of important factories going to Perm for the holidays.

Granovsky felt that he was about to lose consciousness, but Ozols was more experienced in such matters. He went up to the top deck with four of his men, all armed and in uniform.

‘Everybody get off! Take your things with you!’

‘But we have tickets! To Perm!’

‘To hell with you and your tickets! Go down below, to the hold. You have three minutes to think it over.’

‘The guards will travel with you to Perm, I’ll explain along the way.’

Five minutes later, Mr Popp stepped on to the empty deck of *The Red Tataria*.

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# *The Theft*

A gray snow was falling, the sky was gray, the ground was gray, and climbing from one snowy hill to another, the chain of people stretched along the entire horizon. We had to wait for a long time while the work-gang leader got his group into formation – as if some general were hidden beyond the hill.

The work gang lined up in pairs, and turned off the path – the shortest way home to the barracks – on to another road that had not yet been beaten down by convict feet. A tractor had passed this way recently, and the snow had not yet covered its tracks, which looked like the spoor of some prehistoric beast. The going was harder here than on the path, and everyone was hurrying. Every so often someone would stumble, fall behind, pull his snow-filled felt boots out of a drift, and rush to catch up with his comrades. Suddenly, as we came around an enormous snowdrift, there appeared the dark figure of a man in an enormous white sheepskin coat. Only when we came closer did I realize that the snowdrift was a low stack of flour sacks. A truck must have gotten stuck here, unloaded, and been towed away empty by the tractor.

The work gang walked rapidly past the stack of flour sacks toward the guard. Then they slowed down and the men broke ranks. Retreating in darkness, the men finally reached the glare of a large electric light-bulb hanging above the camp gates.

Complaining of cold and exhaustion, the work gang hurriedly got into an uneven formation before the gates. The overseer came out, unlocked the gates, and admitted the people to the camp ‘zone’. Even after we had entered the camp, people remained in formation right up to the barracks. I still understood nothing.

Only toward morning, when they started to divide up the flour, using a pot to scoop it up instead of a measuring cup, did I realize that for the first time in my life I had participated in a theft.

I did not find this particularly upsetting. Indeed, there was not even time to think about what had happened. We each had to cook our share by any means available – either as pancakes or as dumplings.

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# *The Letter*

The half-drunk radio operator yanked open my door. ‘There’s a message for you from headquarters; come over and pick it up.’ He disappeared into the snow and the darkness. I’d brought some frozen rabbits home from my last trip, and I was thawing them out in front of the stove. They had been given to me as a present, but ten carcasses were nothing unusual. It was a good season for rabbits, and a man barely had time to set his traps before they were full. They had to be thawed before they could be eaten, but I immediately lost all interest in rabbits.

A message from headquarters: a telegram, a radiogram, a phone call for me. It was my first telegram in fifteen years. I was startled, anxious. Here, as in any village, a telegram means a tragedy; it deals with death. It couldn’t be an announcement of my release, because I had long since been released. I set off for the radio operator’s fortified castle with its loopholes and three high fences. Each fence had a gate fitted with a latch that had to be opened for me by the radio operator’s wife. I squeezed through all the doors on my way to the landlord’s abode. When the last door had shut behind me, I strode into a bedlam of wings, into the stench of poultry droppings and made my way through a flock of fluttering chickens and crowing cocks. Guarding my face, I crossed over one more threshold, but the radio operator wasn’t there either. There were only pigs: three clean, well-cared-for smallish boars and a somewhat larger sow. This was the last barrier.

The radio operator sat surrounded by crates of pickle brine and green onions. He truly intended to become a millionaire. There are different roads to wealth in Kolyma. One is hardship pay and special rations. The sale of cheap tobacco and tea is another. Raising chickens and hogs is a third.

Crowded to the very edge of the table by all his flora and fauna, the radio operator handed me a sheaf of telegrams. They all looked the same, and I

felt like a parrot picking a card at random.

I sorted through the cables, but couldn't make head or tail of them. Condescendingly, the radio operator picked out my telegram with the tips of his fingers.

It read: 'Come letter,' that is, 'Come for your letter.' The postal service economized on content, but the receiver, of course, understood what was meant.

I went to the area chief and showed him the telegram.

'How far is it?' he asked.

'Five hundred kilometers.'

'Well, I guess so…'

'I'll be back in five days.'

'Good. But don't drag things out. No sense waiting to hitch a ride. The local Yakut tribesmen will take you by dogsled to Baragon. From there you'll have to go by reindeer. If you're not stingy, the postal service will take you. The main thing is to get to the highway.'

When I walked out of the area chief's office, I realized I'd never make it to the damn highway. I wouldn't even make it to Baragon, because I didn't have a coat. I, a resident of Kolyma, didn't have a coat! Sergey Korotkov had given me an almost new white sheepskin coat. He gave me a big pillow too, but when I wanted to quit my job at the prison hospital and leave for the mainland, I sold the coat and the pillow. I didn't want to have any superfluous belongings that would just be stolen or taken away outright by the criminal element. I sold my coat and pillow, but the personnel office and the Magadan Ministry of Internal Affairs refused me permission to leave. So when my money ran out, I had to go back again for a job in Far Northern Construction. And I went to a place where there were flying chickens and a radio operator, but I didn't manage to buy a coat. You couldn't ask someone to loan you one for five days; that kind of request would simply be laughed at in Kolyma. So somehow I had to buy a coat in the village.

I found both a coat and someone willing to sell it. It was black with a luxurious sheepskin collar, but it was more like a jacket than a coat. It had no pockets and the bottom half was cut away. Only the collar and the broad sleeves remained.

'You mean you cut the bottom off?' I asked Ivanov, the camp overseer who sold me the coat. Ivanov lived alone; he was a gloomy type. He'd cut off the bottom half of the coat to make mittens. They were in great demand,

and he made five pairs, each worth the price of a complete sheepskin coat. The pitiful part that was left could hardly be called a coat.

‘What difference does it make? I’m selling a coat. For 500 rubles. You’re buying it. Whether or not I cut off the bottom half has nothing to do with our deal.’

He was right. It was an irrelevant question, and I paid him quickly and took the coat home, where I tried it on and began to wait for night.

I remember the sharp, black eyes of the Yakut who drove the dogsled, my own numb fingers gripping the sled, a river, ice, bushes painfully lashing my face. But I had tied everything on firmly. At a postal station an old friend of mine got me a ride on a reindeer-sleigh. I would run beside it, but mainly I tried to ride. I would hold on tight, fall off, and run alongside again. By evening we reached the lights of the highway and could hear the roar of the trucks hurtling through the darkness.

I paid the Yakut and walked up to the dispatcher’s warming shed. But it wasn’t heated; there wasn’t any firewood. Still it was a roof and walls. A line had already formed of people headed for town, for Magadan. It was a small line – one man. A truck honked and the man ran out into the darkness. The truck honked again and the man was gone. Now it was my turn to run out into the frost.

The five-ton truck shuddered and barely stopped for me. There was a lot of room in the cab, which was a good thing, because it would have been impossible to travel so far in the back, given such bitter cold.

‘Where to?’

‘To the Left Bank.’

‘Can’t take you. I’m taking coal to Magadan, and it isn’t worth taking you if you’re headed for the Left Bank.’

‘I’ll pay you all the way to Magadan.’

‘That changes things. Get in. You know the rate?’

‘Right. A ruble a kilometer.’

‘Money in advance.’

I took the money out of my pocket and paid him. The truck dove into the white darkness and slowed down. The fog made it impossible to go any farther.

‘Let’s sleep on it.’ We curled up in the cab and left the motor running. When dawn came, the white winter fog didn’t seem as terrible as it had the night before.

‘We’ll make some strong tea and get moving.’

The driver boiled a whole package of tea in a tin can, cooled it in the snow, and drank it. He boiled a second canful of tea, drank it, and put the can away.

‘Let’s get on the road.’

‘Where are you from?’

I told him.

‘I was in those parts. I even worked there as a driver. You’ve got a real bastard there. His name is Ivanov, he’s a supervisor. He stole my sheepskin coat. Said he needed it to get home. It was really cold last year. I never saw it again. Not a trace. He wouldn’t give it back. I had some friends ask him for it, but he claimed he never took it. I intend to make a trip out there and get it back. It was a black coat, really nice. What does he need a sheepskin coat for? Maybe he cut it up for mittens and sold them. Everybody wants them nowadays. I could have cut it up myself for mittens. Now there’s no coat, no mittens, no Ivanov.’

I turned away, hunching beneath the collar of my coat.

‘It was a black one, just like yours. The bastard. Well, we’ve had our sleep, we’ve got to get moving.’

The truck lurched forward with a roar. Wide-awake from the incredibly strong tea, the driver honked on the bends.

The distance fell away behind us, bridge followed bridge, gold-mine followed gold-mine. Trucks met and passed each other in the morning light. All of a sudden everything collapsed with a loud clang, and our truck nose-dived into a ditch.

‘Everything’s shot!’ The driver was livid with rage. ‘The coal’s scattered, the cab and the side of the truck are shot! Five tons of coal – gone!’

He was not even scratched, and at first I didn’t understand what had happened.

Our truck had been knocked from the road by a Czechoslovak Tatra. There wasn’t even a scratch on its iron side. The driver stopped the Tatra and climbed out.

‘Figure up quick what your loss is, including fixing the side and the coal,’ the driver of the Tatra shouted. ‘We’ll pay. But no report. You understand?’

‘All right,’ said my driver. ‘That’ll be…’

‘We’ll pay it.’

‘How about me?’ I asked.

‘I’ll get you on another truck going the same way. It’s only about forty kilometers. They’ll get you there. Be a friend.’

‘Forty kilometers is an hour’s ride,’ I protested, but finally agreed. I got into the cab of another truck and waved to Inspector Ivanov’s friend.

By the time our truck began to brake, I had virtually turned to ice. We had reached the Left Bank, and I got out, hoping to find a place to spend the night. They didn’t give out lodging along with letters.

I went to the hospital where I had once worked. It was against the rules to enter a camp hospital, but I went in for a minute to get warm. A civilian orderly whom I knew happened to be coming down the corridor, and I asked him to put me up for the night.

The next day I knocked and entered the office where the letter awaited me. I knew the handwriting well – swift, soaring, but at the same time precise and lucid.

It was a letter from Pasternak.

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# *Fire and Water*

I’ve been tested by fire on more than one occasion. As a boy I once ran down the streets of a blazing wooden town, and the brilliantly illuminated streets etched themselves for ever into my memory. It was as if the town were dissatisfied with the sun and had itself demanded fire. Power surged from the spreading conflagration. Although there was no wind, the houses growled and shook their bodies, flinging burning boards on to the roofs of buildings on the other side of the street.

Inside the town it was clear, dry, warm, and bright, and I easily and fearlessly walked down those blazing streets that let me, a boy, pass, although they were about to be totally destroyed. Only the river saved the main area of town; everything up to the bank burned to the ground.

Another time, as an adult, I experienced the same sensation of calm during a fire. Childhood had long since slipped away, and I was a convict finishing a sentence in a geological prospecting group in the Urals. The expedition’s storehouse had caught fire, but there was no fire engine available, and no bucket brigade could have put out the growing conflagration, even though the river was near.

The storehouse contained a great deal of equipment, and the head of the expedition realized that punishment – probably with implications of sabotage – would be meted out for the fire. He begged people to help, but none of the convicts would go into the fire. He promised everything he could think of – freedom, a hundred working days taken off our sentence for every day, every hour of the fire. Even though I didn’t believe those empty promises, I went into the fire, because I wasn’t afraid of it. Some of the camp authorities, seeing that we weren’t perishing, themselves crossed the threshold of the burning storehouse’s open gates.

It was night-time, and the storehouse was dark. We could never have reached the leveling instruments and theodolites, could never have unpacked the numerous sacks of powder if it hadn't been for the fire. The fire illuminated the walls of the storehouse like a stage. It became dry, warm, bright. We dragged almost everything to the river-bank. Only a heap of clothing in the corner was destroyed – work clothes, sheepskin coats, felt boots.

The head of the expedition was more angry than pleased, since he was left with all the same problems: someone would have to pay for the destroyed clothing. I never received a single day's credit for my efforts. No one even thanked me for fighting the fire. But I felt again my childhood sensation of fearlessness near the fire.

I've seen a lot of fires in the taiga. I've walked across luxurious blue moss a yard thick with patterns etched into it as if it were a fabric. I've picked my way through larch forests felled by flame. The trees, roots and all, had been torn from the soil, not by the wind, but by fire. Fire was like a storm, creating its own wind, hurling trees on to their sides, and leaving a black path through the taiga for ever. And then collapsing helplessly on a river-bank. A bright yellow flame would scamper through the dry grass, which would shake and sway as if a snake were crawling through it. But there are no snakes in Kolyma.

A yellow flame would race up the trunk of a larch, gather strength, roar, and shake the trunk. The trees' convulsions, death convulsions, were always the same. I have often seen the hippocratic death mask of a tree.

It had been raining for three days at the hospital, and I couldn't help but remember the fire. Rain would have saved the town, the geologists' storehouse, the burning taiga. Water is stronger than fire.

All recuperating patients were sent out to gather mushrooms and berries across the river, where blueberries and cowberries grew in unbelievable quantities and where there were veritable thickets of colorful mushrooms with slippery cold caps. The mushrooms seemed cold – like live cold-blooded animals, like snakes. They seemed like anything but mushrooms.

Mushrooms appear late. Sometimes they come after the rains, but not every year. But when they do appear, they surround every tent, fill every forest, pack the underbrush.

We were to gather them in baskets, sort them for drying or marinating by Uncle Sasha, the camp cook who, on this occasion at least, recalled his

glorious past as a cook in Moscow's fashionable Prague Restaurant and his culinary education in Geneva. Uncle Sasha had been a chef at government dinners, and had even once been entrusted with preparing a meal in honor of the arrival of William Bullitt, the first American ambassador to the Soviet Union. The dinner was in the Russian style, the Russian genre. There was bortsch, Russian cabbage soup, suckling pig with kasha. Uncle Sasha's assistants brought five hundred miniature ceramic pots from Kostroma. Each held a single serving of kasha. The creation was a success.

Bullitt praised the kasha. But the suckling pig! Bullitt pushed the pig away, ate the kasha, and asked for a second portion. Uncle Sasha was awarded the Order of Lenin.

Soon after that, Uncle Sasha was arrested. It was recorded in his file that Filippov, the director of the Moscow restaurant, The Prague, had invited Uncle Sasha to become head chef, promised him an apartment, an enormous salary, and trips abroad. 'Soon after I switched to The Prague, Filippov asked me to poison the government. And I agreed.'

Uncle Sasha directed our labors. Gathering wild mushrooms and berries is one of the Kolyma psychoses. We did it every day.

Today it was cold. There was a chilling wind, but it had stopped raining, and the pale autumn sky could be seen through the torn clouds, clearly indicating that it wasn't going to rain.

We had to go. A patient in the convict hospital couldn't feel secure if he wasn't doing something for the doctor, for the hospital. The women would crochet, a carpenter would make a table, an engineer would use a ruler to make up a supply of blank forms, a laborer would bring a basket of mushrooms or a bucket of berries.

We didn't choose to go for mushrooms; we had to go. There was a rich harvest after the rain, and three of us set out across the river in a small boat – just as we did every morning. The water was rising slightly, the current was swifter than usual, and the waves were darker.

Safonov pointed his finger at the water and then upriver, and we all understood what he meant.

'We've got enough time. There are a lot of mushrooms,' Verigin said.

'We can't go back,' I said.

'Let's do it this way,' Safonov said. 'The sun will be right opposite that mountain at four o'clock. Let's return to the shore at four. We'll tie the boat upstream.'

We split up in various directions – each of us had his favorite spot.

But as soon as I had entered the forest, I realized there was no need to hurry. A mushroom kingdom lay right here at my feet. The mushroom caps were as big as a man's cap or the palm of his hand. It didn't take long to fill two big baskets. I carried the baskets out to the meadow, near the tractor road, so I could find them right away and set off to at least take a look at the spots that I had selected long before.

I entered the forest, and my mushroom-gatherer's soul was shaken. Everywhere were enormous mushrooms standing separately – higher than the grass, higher than the cowberry bushes. The firm, resilient, fresh mushrooms were incredible.

Beaten by the Kolyma rains, these mushrooms had grown into monsters with caps a half-yard in diameter. They grew everywhere the eye could see – so fresh, so firm, so healthy that it was impossible to make any decision other than to go back, throw away everything I had gathered earlier, and return to the hospital with these magical mushrooms in my hands.

And that was exactly what I did.

It was all a question of time, but I calculated I would need half an hour to get back down the path.

I descended the hill and pulled the bushes aside. Cold water covered the path for yards. The path had disappeared under water while I had been gathering mushrooms.

The forest rustled, and the cold water rose higher. An ever-increasing roar could be heard. I walked back up the hill and around the mountain to the right, to the place where we were to meet. I didn't abandon the mushrooms; the two heavy baskets hung from my shoulders, tied together with a towel.

From higher up on the hillside, I approached the grove where our boat was supposed to be. The water had already reached the spot and was rising.

I climbed a hill on the shore.

The river was roaring, ripping up trees and flinging them into the current. Not a single shrub remained of the grove where we had beached that morning. The soil holding the trees had been washed away and the trees had been ripped up and carried off. The terrible muscular strength of the water was like that of a wrestler. The far shore was rocky, and the river was forced to vent its rage upon the wooded bank where I stood. The stream that we had crossed in the morning had long since been transformed into a monster.

It was getting dark, and I realized I had to retreat to the mountain and wait there for dawn – as far as possible from the raging, icy waters. Soaked to the skin, constantly slipping in the water, jumping from one hummock to another, I dragged the baskets to the foot of the mountain. The autumn night was black, starless, and cold, and the dull growl of the river drowned out any voices that I might have been able to hear.

Suddenly a light gleamed from a narrow valley, and I didn't even realize at first that it was not an evening star, but a bonfire. Could it be escaped convicts? Geologists? Fishermen? Hay-mowers? I set out in the direction of the fire, leaving two baskets near a large tree so I could pick them up at dawn. The small basket I took with me.

Distances in the taiga are deceptive. A hut, a boulder, a forest, a river, a sea can be much nearer or farther away than they seem. The decision 'yes' or 'no' was a simple one. There was a fire, and I had to go there; that was all there was to it. The fire was another important power in the night. A saving power. I was prepared to walk as long as might be necessary – even if I had to feel my way. After all, the nocturnal fire meant people, life, salvation.

I walked along the valley, careful not to lose sight of the fire. After a half-hour I circled an enormous boulder and suddenly saw a camp-fire before me – higher up, on a stone outcropping. The fire was burning before a tent that was as low as a rock. People were sitting round the fire. They paid no attention to me. I didn't ask what they were doing here but walked up to the fire to get warm. I wanted to eat, but it is not the custom to ask strangers for bread in Kolyma. They were convict hay-mowers from the hospital – the same hospital for which I had been gathering mushrooms.

I couldn't ask for bread, but I could ask for an empty tin can. They gave me a smudged, dented pot in which I scooped up some water and boiled one of the giant mushrooms.

The head mower unwrapped a dirty rag and silently handed me a piece of salt, and soon the water in the pot began to leap and squeak as it whitened with foam and heat. I ate the tasteless monster mushroom, washed it down with boiling water, and warmed up a little.

As I drowsed by the fire, dawn came slowly and silently, and I set off for the river-bank without thanking the mowers for their hospitality. I could see my two baskets a half-mile away. The water-level was already dropping. I made my way through the forest, clutching at those trees that had survived.

Their branches were broken, and their bark was ripped off. I picked my way along the stones, occasionally stepping on heaps of mountain sand. I approached the shore; yes, it was a shore – a new shore defined by the wavering line of the flood waters. Still heavy from the rains, the river rushed past, but it was obvious that the water level was dropping.

Far away, very far away – on the other shore, which seemed like the other shore of life – I could see figures waving their arms. I saw the boat and began to wave my arms as well. They understood me. The boat was carried upstream on poles about a mile from the spot where I was standing. Safonov and Verigin brought it in much farther downstream than the spot where I stood. Safonov handed me my bread ration of 600 grams – a little more than a pound – but I had no appetite.

I dragged out my baskets with the miracle mushrooms. What with the rain and my having hauled them through the forest at night and bumping them against the trees in the dark, there were only pieces left in the basket – pieces of mushroom.

‘Maybe we should throw them away?’ Verigin said.

‘No, what for…’

‘We threw ours away yesterday. Barely managed to get the boat across. We thought of you,’ Safonov said firmly, ‘but we decided we’d really get it in the neck if we lost the boat. No one would give a damn about you.’

‘No one gives a damn about me,’ I said.

‘That’s right. Neither we, nor the chief would get in trouble over you, but the boat… Did I do the right thing?’

‘Yes, you did the right thing,’ I said.

‘Get in,’ Safonov said, ‘and take those damn baskets.’

We pushed off from shore and began our journey back – a tiny boat in the still heaving and stormy river.

Back at the hospital we were met without cursing or joy. Safonov was right to give first priority to the boat.

I had dinner, supper, and breakfast. Then I had dinner and supper. When I had eaten my entire two-day ration, I began to feel sleepy. I got warm. But for perfect bliss I needed tea – just boiling water, of course. Only the camp administrators drank real tea.

I sat down next to the barracks stove and put a pot of water on the fire – tame water on a tame fire. Soon the water began to leap furiously in the pot. But I was already asleep.

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# *Graphite*

Which ink is used to sign death sentences – chemical ink, the India ink used in passports, the ink of fountain-pens, alizarin? No death sentence has ever been signed simply in pencil.

In the taiga we had no use for ink. Any ink will dissolve in rain, tears, and blood. Chemical pens cannot be sent to prisoners and are confiscated if discovered. Such pens are treated like printer's ink and used to draw the home-made playing cards owned by the criminal element and therefore… Only the simple, black graphite pencil is permitted. In Kolyma, graphite carries enormous responsibility.

The cartographers discussed the matter with the heavens, peered into the starry sky, measured the height of the sun, and established a point of reference on our earth. Above this point a marble tablet was set into the stone of the mountaintop, and a tripod, a log signal, was affixed to the spot. This tripod indicates the precise location on the map, and an invisible network of meridians and parallels extends from this point across valleys, clearings, and marshes. When a road is cut through the taiga, each landmark is sighted through the cross-hairs of the level and the theodolite. The land has been measured, the taiga has been measured, and we come upon the benchmark of the cartographer, the topographer, the measurer of the earth – recorded in simple black graphite.

The topographers have crossed and criss-crossed the Kolyma taiga with roads, but even so these roads exist only in areas surrounding settlements and mines. The clearings and naked hills are crossed only by ethereal, imaginary lines for which there are no reliable benchmarks, no tagged trees. Benchmarks are established on cliffs, river-beds, and bare mountaintops. The measurement of the taiga, the measurement of Kolyma, the measurement of a prison is based on these reliable points of reference,

whose authority is biblical. A network of clearings is indicated by benchmarks on the trees, benchmarks which can be seen in the cross-hairs of the theodolite and which are used to survey the taiga.

Only a simple black pencil will do for making a notation of a benchmark. Ink will run, be dissolved by the tree sap, be washed away by rain, dew, fog, and snow. Nothing as artificial as ink will do for recording eternity and immortality. Graphite is carbon that has been subjected to enormous pressure for millions of years and that might have become coal or diamonds. Instead, however, it has been transformed into something more precious than a diamond; it has become a pencil that can record all that it has seen… A pencil is a greater miracle than a diamond, although the chemical make-up of graphite and diamond is identical.

It is not only on benchmarks that topographers may not use pens. Any map legend or draft of a legend resulting from a visual survey demands graphite for immortality. Graphite is nature. It participates in the spinning of the planet and resists time better than stone. Limestone mountains are washed away by rains, winds, and waves, but a 200-year-old larch tree is still young, and it will live and preserve on its benchmark the code that links today's world with the biblical secret. Even as the tree's fresh wound still bleeds and the sap falls like tears, a number – an arbitrary mark – is written upon the trunk.

In the taiga, only graphite can be used for writing. A topographer always keeps pencil stubs, fragments of pencils in the pockets of his vest, jacket, pants, overcoat. Paper, a notebook, a carrying-case – and a tree with a benchmark – are the medium of his art.

Paper is one of the faces, one of the transformations of a tree into diamond or graphite. Graphite is eternity, the highest standard of hardness, which has become the highest standard of softness. A trace left in the taiga by a graphite pencil is eternal.

The benchmark is carefully hewn. Two horizontal cuts are made at waist level on the trunk of a larch tree, and the edge of the axe is used to break off the still living wood. A miniature house is formed, a clean board sheltered from the rain. This shelter preserves the recorded benchmark almost for ever – till the end of the larch's six-hundred-year life.

The wounded larch is like a prophetic icon – like the Chukotsk Mother of God or the Virgin Mary of Kolyma who awaits and foretells a miracle. The

subtle, delicate smell of tree sap, the larch's blood spilled by a man's axe, is like a distant memory of childhood or the incense of dew.

A number has been recorded, and the wounded larch, burned by wind and sun, preserves this 'tag', which points the way from the forsaken spot in the taiga to the outside world. The way leads through the clearings to the mountaintop with the nearest tripod, the cartographic tripod, under which is a pit filled with rocks. Under the rocks is a marble tablet indicating the actual latitude and longitude – a recording not made with a graphite pencil. And we return to our world along the thousands of threads that lead from this tripod, along the thousands of lines that lead from one axe mark to another so that we may remember life. Those who work in the topographic service work in the service of life.

In Kolyma, however, not only the topographer must use a graphite pencil. The pen is forbidden not only in the service of life, but also in the service of death. Archive No. 3 is the name of the office in camp that records convict deaths. Its instructions read that a plywood tag must be attached to the left shin of every dead body. The tag records the prisoner's 'case number'. The case number must be written with a simple graphite pencil – not a pen. Even here an artificial writing tool would interfere with eternity.

The practice strikes one as odd. Can there really be plans for exhumation? For immortality? For resurrection? For reburial? There are more than enough mass graves in Kolyma, into which untagged bodies have been dumped. But instructions are instructions. Theoretically speaking, all guests of the permafrost enjoy life eternal and are ready to return to us – that we might remove the tags from their left shins and find their friends and relatives.

All that is required is that the tag bear the required number written in simple black pencil. The case number cannot be washed away by rains or underground springs which appear every time the ice yields to the heat of summer and surrenders some of its subterranean secrets – only some.

The convict's file with its front- and side-view photographs, fingerprints, and description of unusual marks is his passport. An employee of Archive No. 3 is supposed to make up a report in five copies of the convict's death and to note if any gold teeth have been removed. There is a special form for gold teeth. It had always been that way in Kolyma, and the reports in Germany of teeth removed from the dead bodies of prisoners surprised no one in Kolyma.

Certain countries do not wish to lose the gold of dead men. There have always been reports of extraction of gold teeth in prisons and labor camps. The year 1937 brought many people with gold teeth to the investigators and the camps. Many of those who died in the mines of Kolyma, where they could not survive for long, produced gold for the state only in the form of their own teeth, which were knocked out after they died. There was more gold in their fillings than these people were able to extract with pick and shovel during their brief lives in the mines.

The dead man's fingers were supposed to be dipped in printer's ink, of which employees of Archive No. 3 had an enormous supply. This is why the hands of killed escapees were cut off – it was easier to put two human palms in a military pouch than transport an entire body, a corpse for identification.

A tag attached to a leg is a sign of cultural advance. The body of Andrei Bogoliubsky, the murdered twelfth-century Russian prince, had no such tag, and it had to be identified by the bones, using Bertillon's calculation method.

We put our trust in fingerprinting. It has never failed us, no matter how the criminals might have disfigured their fingertips, burning them with fire and acid, and slashing them with knives. No criminal could ever bring himself to burn off all ten.

We don't have any confidence in Bertillon, the chief of the French Criminal Investigation Department and the father of the anthropological principle of criminology which makes identifications by a series of measurements establishing the relative proportions of the parts of the body. Bertillon's discoveries are of use to artists; the distance from the tip of the nose to the ear lobe tells us nothing.

We believe in fingerprinting, and everyone knows how to give his prints or 'play the piano'. In '37, when they were scooping up everyone who had been marked earlier for doom, each man placed his accustomed fingers into the accustomed hands of a prison employee in an accustomed movement.

These prints are preserved for ever in the case histories. The tag with the case number preserves not only the name of the place of death but also the secret cause of that death. This number is written on the tag with graphite.

The cartographer who lays out new paths on the earth, new roads for people, and the gravedigger, who must observe the laws of death, must both use the same instrument – a black graphite pencil.

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1 Silvester Mora (pseudonym of Kazimierz Zamorski), *Kolyma: God and Forced Labor in the USSR*, Washington, DC, 1949, p. 17.

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2 Robert Conquest, *Kolyma*, New York, 1978.

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3 ‘The Ultimate Circle of the Stalinist Inferno’, *New Universities Quarterly*, 34 (Spring 1980).

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* There are approximately 2 million Germans in the USSR. – TRANS.

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* A reference to Mandelstam’s poem ‘Notre Dame’. – TRANS.

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* The Decembrists were a group of Russian officers who unsuccessfully attempted to stage a coup in December of 1825. Most were exiled to Siberia, accompanied by their wives. – TRANS.

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* 1886–1934. Prominent figure in the government. His death, declared part of a conspiracy, served as a pretext to set in motion the great purges. – TRANS.

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* Infamous Soviet prosecutor (1885–1940), who himself died in the purges. – TRANS.

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* Famous Russian theater director, 1879–1953. – TRANS.

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* An extremely wealthy man before the revolution. – TRANS.

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* First American secretary of defense. Committed suicide in May 1949. – TRANS.

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* Shot during the purge of 1938. – TRANS.

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